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New York: D. APPLETON & CO., 72 Fifth Avenue.

NÙLMA

AN ANGLO-AUSTRALIAN ROMANCE

BY

MRS. CAMPBELL-PRAED

AUTHOR OF MRS. TREGASKISS, CHRISTINA CHARD,
OUTLAW AND LAWMAKER, ETC.



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N U L M A .

CHAPTER I.

ON DECK.

THERE was at this time much excitement in Leichardt's Land. The Governor had finished his term of office, and a new Governor was about to take his place. There were also other changes in the general administration of law and order. The first Chief Justice who had come out with the Governor on the formation of the colony into a separate independency was dead, and his successor, appointed in England—a cause of offence to the Leichardtstonians—was to arrive at the same time as the new Governor. The Leichardtstonians were not altogether pleased at the choice that had been made in the matter of their new Governor. They were a little spoiled. The former Administrator and the inaugurator as well of their political independence, had been a young man of mark in his way, and of considerable intellectual endowments. Moreover, he had brought out as his bride a lady who was very beautiful—a foreigner of high birth

and great social attractions, who had at once captivated the warm-hearted Leichardtstonians. To be sure, the colony was a baby, so to speak, and had no right to expect the best that was going; but babies are proverbially exacting and loud-voiced in their complaints; and Leichardt's Land felt aggrieved, and declared openly that if she were not good enough to have a peer, like two of her sister colonies, or an ex-diplomat of some distinction and wealth like another, she should at least have been given something better than a worn-out soldier, whose health and energy had been sapped by African fevers in his last governorship; who was only a commoner, and not a wealthy one, and who was, moreover, a widower.

That last fact certainly might, under some conditions, have been a recommendation; but it was generally known that Colonel Burnside, as the new Governor was named, did not care for society, and was too old to think of altering his state. Matrons and maids wailed loudly, declaring that Government House would never be again what it had been in dear Lady Randal's time; and there had been even talk of a protest on the part of Leichardt's Land to her Majesty's Government.

In the midst of the general discontent there came a drop of balm into the cup of bitterness. Though the new Governor was a widower, it became known that his late wife had been the sister of the present Marquis of Kelvin, and that the lady

who would do the honours of Government House was a certain Lady Arthur Keefe, wife of Colonel Burnside's nephew by marriage, whom he was bringing out as his private secretary. To have a Lady Arthur, a Marquis's daughter-in-law, at the head of social affairs was the next best thing to having a genuine peeress, and Leichardt's Town was to a certain extent comforted.

Of course, Lord Arthur Keefe was only a fourth son, and it was agreed that he must be poor to accept such an appointment, which took away from the consolation. But again it was suggested that he, too, might have delicate lungs, like the new Chief Justice, that eminent barrister, Outram Kenward, Q. C., who was throwing up a successful practice and good prospects as a likely member of Parliament solely because his doctor had declared it absolutely necessary that he should pass several years in a warm, dry climate, the air of Leichardt's Land, it is well known, being a certain preventive against tendency to consumption.

There was a good deal of speculation rife about Lady Arthur. In those days volumes of Burke and Debrett were not plentiful in Leichardt's Land, for social exigencies did not often require the consultation of a table of precedence; but in time it became duly established that, oddly enough, she also was a foreigner; presumably, however, nobody of distinction, for she was set down simply as Marguerite, daughter of one Charles Mallalieu—without even

a “de”—of Brussels. Then it was whispered that she was a little older than her husband, and that she, like the brilliant Lady Randal, was very handsome and very charming, so that though the elder ladies of Leichardt’s Town, most of whom were of English extraction, frowned, the young married women and the girls plucked up heart, for they now felt pretty certain that there would be good times at Government House, after all.

The object of this discussion suspected something of what was being said about her. She was sitting on the deck of the man-of-war which had been sent on from the capital of the next colony to convey the new Governor to Leichardt’s Town, the small coasting steamer not being in those days considered good enough for such distinguished passengers. It was the evening before they were to arrive at their destination. Lady Arthur was lying upon a deck-chair, her profile showing clearly in the moonlight against a background of bulwarks, and, as the vessel lurched, of deep blue sky in which the Southern constellations shone palely. She was certainly a very pretty woman, more charming, perhaps, than absolutely pretty, with that charm of a certain exotic type—creamy skin, narrow oval face, slightly aquiline nose, a seductive sort of smile, full-lidded, short-sighted-looking dark eyes, with arched brows and crinkly dark hair, parted above the brows. She had something of the foreign manner of gesticulation too, but, when she spoke, only

a very slight accent. At a little distance from her, in a more sheltered part of the deck, sat the Governor, a fine-looking old man with a heavy white moustache, and it was evident, even in the moonlight, a yellow, unhealthy skin. He was smoking a cigar and talking to one of the officers. By the side of the vessel stood a tall, slightly corpulent young man, with a handsome, expressionless face, heavy in mould, a pointed, blonde moustache, and thin, closely-cropped fair hair. He looked stupid, but noticeably a gentleman. He was smoking, too, in company of another of the officers, and every now and then lifted his large head, which he kept when speaking rather bent forward, to glance in the direction of Lady Arthur and a man she was talking to. The corpulent gentleman was Lord Arthur Keefe, the lady's husband, and Governor Burnside's private secretary. Her companion was the Chief Justice.

An aide-de-camp and one or two other men were lounging upon the deck. The man to whom Lady Arthur was talking was of quite a different type from the members of the Governor's staff or the officers of the man-of-war. He was impressive-looking, with a massive, inscrutable kind of face, its large features seeming larger because of his excessive leanness, the nose was slightly hooked, and he had that peculiar flexible mouth, stern, and yet humorous, which seems to be a characteristic of the legal profession. His shoulders were broad, and

he had the makings of a strikingly powerful and athletic frame; but the effect was again spoiled by his leanness and an evident constitutional delicacy out of keeping with Nature's original intention. He had very deep-set dark eyes, and a way of gazing at the person whom he addressed that would in the witness-box be disconcerting; and he had also a rather wearied expression, as if the banalities of life had been a little too oppressive. His hair was almost coal black, but had one striking peculiarity. On the left side, from almost the crown of the head to the tip of the ear, there was a patch of silvery white. He was not a young man, but he looked older than his years, which were about thirty-five. He had been gazing very intently at Lady Arthur as she lay back, softly furling and unfurling a fan with steel spangles, which reflected the light from the companion-way. They had been silent for a minute or two. He broke the silence abruptly:

“I know you don't object to my smoking.”

She laughed. “That should be an established fact by this time. Besides, Arthur is hardly ever without a cigarette—except when he is absolutely on duty.”

She watched him take out his case, and deliberately select a cigar, which he lighted and puffed slowly without speaking.

“I wonder,” she exclaimed, “what they expect of me over there.”

"You'll soon find out. To-morrow you will have come into your kingdom."

"No, I shan't find out—not at once, anyhow; one never does till one has made irretrievable mistakes."

"Oh, you won't make mistakes."

"What makes you say that?" she asked with some sharpness.

"Well, you haven't made any as yet."

"I have made one great and irretrievable mistake—no, I have made two."

"Tell me." He bent towards her, and added, with a caressing touch in his voice, "I hope you are not going to say something which it would pain me to hear? I think I know the first mistake."

He gave an almost imperceptible glance towards the spot where Lord Arthur was standing, out of earshot of the two. Lady Arthur followed the direction of his eyes, and made an equally imperceptible nod.

"Yes, that's one."

"The great and irretrievable one. And the other?"

"Can't you guess that, too. From what you said, I should think you must do so."

"I suppose I do. You have been hinting at regrets lately. And this is the last evening! That's what I meant. Why be unkind—now?"

"Do you really care?"

" You know I care. Haven't I given the best proof of it?"

" In coming out here? But that was a great deal my doing."

" And—you forget—Sir Alured Lake's."

" Ah, yes; you couldn't have stood another winter." The statement was half interrogative.

" I dare say I should have knocked under. Sir Alured said so, anyhow. Oh, I haven't the faintest doubt as to the wisdom of my coming out here—in the long-run," he went on quietly. " It should help my career. I shall be dealing with new elements, and it's always a good thing to get out of the old-world rut; one can always go back to it again."

" If in the meantime one isn't forgotten," she interposed.

" The new colony is in people's mouths," he answered. " I shall be kept before the public even better than if a big case were to hoist me into prominence in England. Didn't our predecessor Randal quote from somebody or other in his farewell speech the sentiment that to help in the formation of a new State is to write one's name upon the bark of a sapling which will grow to a forest oak? The writing grows with the tree, and becomes an advertisement. In these days careers need advertising."

" You think of nothing but your career," said the lady with a plaintive note in her voice.

"Indeed," he exclaimed, "I don't think you ought to say that."

She put out a slim hand and just touched his coat sleeve. "We seem to be sparring; and it is the last evening."

"Isn't that just what I wanted to impress upon you when you spoke of regrets?"

"But I did not speak of regrets," she rejoined warmly; "or if there were regrets in my mind, they were the reflection of those in yours."

"Perhaps," she added presently with one of her winning smiles, "the mistake I meant—the second one—is not so serious as you may have imagined. I remember that when I was married, and we were thinking of going to the States for our wedding-trip, Blanche Wilford said to me, 'My dear, don't do it; you can't imagine what a disenchanting thing a voyage is: one would hate even one's lover at the end of it—how much more one's husband!' Sounds immoral, doesn't it? But you see the application?"

"Not in the least. It is exactly the sentiment, however, that I should have expected from your friend Mrs. Wilford. And there I do see the application."

"How horrid of you! To hear you talk, one would imagine you a worn-out cynic instead of the most romantic being ever created."

. "That's rather strong, isn't it? I prefer the imputation of being a cynic."

"Oh, but you *are* romantic, notwithstanding," she said; "you keep your illusions down deep at the bottom of your heart, but they are there all the same. No, I haven't got any illusions about you," she added with faint bitterness, "and I know you have none about me; that's the worst of it all. You take us—women like me, of the world, worldly—just at the valuation the world puts upon us; we are part of the game to you, and even if you lose your heads in the excitement of the play, you don't do so to the extent of seeing us with halos round ours."

"A halo wouldn't be a becoming head-dress to you," he answered. "It only suits the Madonna type, which is distinctly uninteresting."

"I wonder if you would find it so. I don't feel at all sure. Listen, and I will make you a frank confession of my lurking fear about you. I never felt the least jealous of Nora Glassthwaite in spite of her good looks and her money and all the talk there was once about you and her; but I do believe that you are the kind of man capable of marrying a girl out of a convent, and adoring her innocence—as long as she kept it. I know that there's a sort of fascination for you in the notion of moulding a child of Nature."

"Possibly," he answered coldly, "on the theory of reaction. But I don't fancy that a convent boarding-school is exactly the place where one would go to look for the child of Nature."

"Ah, well, perhaps not. *I* was educated in a convent."

There was silence again. Kenward puffed his cigar, and she fanned herself. Presently Lord Arthur came up to them.

"The Governor wants his whist. I suppose you don't care to take a hand, Margot?"

"No, I think not to-night; it's nicer up here."

"Nor you, Kenward?"

"No, I think not," also replied the Chief Justice. "I am of Lady Arthur's opinion, that it's nicer up here."

"Oh, well, there are plenty to make up the game. I suppose I must go; it's a beastly bore."

But he lingered, looking at his wife in that stolid, questioning way of his which at times irritated her intensely. Somehow, it did not harmonize with his youthful face and boyish manner.

"You and Kenward seemed to be having a pretty deep discussion," he said. "What were you talking about?"

"I was telling him that he'd end by marrying a child of Nature," she returned.

"Oh—well!" Lord Arthur had a way of saying "Oh—well!" which also irritated his wife. "I should think he'd be more likely to find her in these parts than over there."

"Than in a convent school," she interrupted. "That's just what he was saying himself." She

gave a jangling little laugh, and made an impatient movement in her long chair.

"I wasn't thinking about a convent. What put that in your head? I was thinking of London," replied Lord Arthur. "Is anything the matter with you, Margot?"

"Nothing; I'm feeling a little nervous at the prospect before me, that's all. I hear that the Leichardtstonians made a goddess out of Lady Randal. Do you suppose they'll want to put me on a pedestal too, and worship me? Because I don't think I can live up to that kind of thing. Now, do you fancy I shall satisfy them?"

"Satisfy them! why, of course. Haven't you always satisfied everyone?"

Lord Arther turned his slow gaze again on his wife; this time it was a gaze of admiration.

"That's a delightful view of one for one's husband to take. But remember I come after Lady Randal."

"Oh, confound Lady Randal! She has been crammed down our throats ever since we heard of the appointment. Come, Margot, there's a social ambition for you: beat Lady Randal on her own ground."

"She has departed from the ground; it would be fighting a ghost. And ghosts don't make mistakes and do stupid things."

"Don't they?" put in the Chief Justice. "I

always thought that a want of common-sense was the principal characteristic of ghosts."

"Well, anyhow, you won't do stupid things, Margot," said Lord Arthur.

Lady Arthur got up with a rustle of her draperies.

"I'm going to walk, and that's a stupid thing this hot weather. Be off to your game, Arthur: you mustn't keep his Excellency waiting."

Lord Arthur left them. Kenward had risen too. "May I offer you my arm?"

She took it, and twice they made the turn of the deck without speaking. Then she stopped and leaned over the bulwarks, her chin resting upon her clasped hands. They were now practically alone. The Governor and suite, as the newspapers would put it, had gone down. The Chief Justice glanced cautiously round, then came closer to her and softly put his hand on one of hers, unclasping it from the other and holding it in his own.

"Margot!" he said in that low, deep voice of his which could be at times almost a caress. "Why are you cruel to me—on this our last night?"

"*I* cruel—to *you!*"

"What else is it but cruelty, to talk of the disenchantment of a voyage, to hint at regrets and at mistakes? Aren't we too good friends for that kind of thing?"

"Friends! yes, that's just it. Outram, doesn't

it strike you sometimes that this very—friendship has been a great mistake."

"No; it has not struck me—till now."

"You want to imply that I am making it so by my way of taking this matter, when of course it must be—as it is. I dare say that I am unreasonable and exacting and tactless. A woman always is, when she cares as much as I care, and when she sees, afar off it may be, but still certain, the end."

"What would you have me do? So far, I have entirely obeyed your commands. You wished me to accept the Leichardt's Land appointment, and I have done so."

"Ah, it was *me*, then, whom you obeyed, not Sir Alured?" With characteristic change of mood, she turned on him one of those serious yet coquettish smiles which made the greatest charm of her face. "Outram," she went on, her manner changing again, "I will tell you what I have been feeling these last days. It is not weariness or dissatisfaction with myself, or even with you, though I have fancied you were different—that you had grown colder—"

"You forget," he interrupted, "that we have been, as it were, under a telescope."

"Oh yes, I know. And I suppose we shall be still more under a telescope when we get to Leichardt's Land. A case of 'the' fierce light, et cetera, don't you know. No; it's the falseness of the

position that has been coming home to me. I did not feel it before, when one could get away from things, and when Arthur was in India and one was comparatively free. But now—there's no escape on board a steamer. Arthur is always there; and the old man is always there; and the aides look on, and maybe form their own conclusions; and you—that very mask you wear in public drives me wild! It's a denial of me."

"Oh, Margot!"

"Of course I'm foolish and unreasonable to resent what you do in protection of me. But we have been so horribly—friendly. And to think of its going on—the friendliness, and nothing more!—month after month; you playing your part, and I mine, till yours ceases to be a part; till I become in very truth no more to you than a friend—a woman whom you once loved, and have come to pity; who was of use to you in the beginning of your career, but who is getting monotonous, and, in short, inconvenient. One knows the stages. Then comes the inevitable—the young girl."

"Margot, do you not give me credit for any feeling of honour?"

"Yes; I give you credit for more than most men have. I think you would hesitate a good deal, and I should see the hesitation. It would madden me more than if you came and told me the truth outright—that you were tired of me—and I should perhaps do something desperate and wicked. Lis-

ten, Outram. I'm in a magnificent mood to-night; ready to let you have your freedom, if you choose to accept it. Do you choose? You may never have the chance again."

He threw away the butt of the cigar he had been smoking, but did not answer.

"Do you choose?" she repeated. "Think; you may be quite free of me—free to court the child of Nature without a qualm; free to go back again to your beloved London and its fogs."

"Which would soon finish up my shaky lungs. Besides, isn't it rather late for that, considering that I shall be installed to-morrow as Chief Justice of Leichardt's Land."

"Well, you can stay a year, till your lungs are all right again. Our term is five, and by the end of it you will have forgotten me. In the meantime, we shall make our bow and curtsey prettily to each other—you as the Chief Justice, and I as the lady of Government House; and we shall endeavour to control our emotions in accordance with the dignity of our respective situations. Come, do you accept?"

"No."

"Thank you, Outram."

She tilted up her face upon the palm of her hand, and the moonlight was reflected in her shining eyes. His eyes, as he returned the gaze, were full of trouble and of a certain struggling passion.

"If we were anywhere else," he whispered, "I would give you a different sort of assurance."

She seemed to drink in his words, and heaved a deep sigh of content.

"Thank you, Outram," she murmured again.

CHAPTER II.

THE STATE ENTRY.

THE man-of-war was at anchor in the bay. It was a brilliant morning. The month was March, but an unusual freshness had succeeded the muggy heat of the last week or two. March in Australia is as fickle as her companion month in England, only she is less blustering about her changes; it may be very cool in March, or the heat may be tropical; everything depends upon when the rainy season begins and ends. To-day the sky was of a Mediterranean blue, the sea also. Upon the bar white breakers made a shiny line. Low-lying, mangrove-covered flats stretched down to the harbour. Beyond stood higher ground, and in the far distance rose the conical peaks of some blue mountains.

The Government tender, gaily decorated with flags, was drawn up alongside of the man-of-war. The acting Governor, whose glory was now almost at an end, the acting President of the Legislative Council, the Premier and his colleagues, and nearly all the prominent officials of Leichardt's Town, had

come down to receive the new Governor and his party, and to welcome the Chief Justice.

There was a banquet on the man-of-war before the re-embarkation took place. Lady Arthur sat between the Governor and the Vice-Governor, who would be formally deposed as soon as his successor had taken the oath. She had been at great pains with her appearance, and was looking particularly well; she also did her best to be charming to the Vice-Governor—who was, properly speaking, President of the Upper Chamber—and to the Ministers and other important people. Her best meant a good deal, and it was not surprising that she created a favourable impression. The general opinion dropped in whispers after the banquet was that, if not equal to Lady Randal, she was extremely handsome, and very much in the same style as the former Governor's wife. This was in her favour with the Leichardtstonians, who had had an agreeable experience of foreign women. She was an object of even greater interest than the Governor himself, whose manner to her, it was remarked, was fatherly, chivalrous, and quite after the old school. There could be no doubt that he intended her to exercise all due social authority, and that there was going to be no misunderstanding as to her position. To the Ministers and officials Colonel Burnside was reserved and dignified. He was shy, and his shyness made him appear stiff. If not a peer, he at any rate produced an awing effect

upon his new subjects. "A martinet!" pronounced the Premier, Mr. Latham, a thin, hatchet-faced gentleman, whose arms and legs seemed set on wires, and who had narrow, keen eyes, a goatee beard, and was modelled something on Yankee lines.

"I tell you what it is, James Goodeve," he went on, "you'll have to mind your p's and q's now when the Executive meets. There'll be a good deal more ceremony, you bet, than there used to be in Governor Randal's time."

James Goodeve gave a gruff laugh. He was a big, burly individual, with an expansive chest, a bushy grizzled beard and bristling moustache. He was hard and rough in appearance, but looked the person he was speaking to straight in the eyes, and gave an impression of sturdy independence and good-nature.

"Well, I don't know about that," he said. "It has never been my way to mind my p's and q's for anybody; and the Governor must take me as I am, or leave me out of his calculations. And my Nùlma, too—though," he added with another gruff chuckle, "I should be surprised if he did leave my Nùlma behind the door when her turn came. She's good to look at, if she's not much good at other things. Isn't that so, Latham?"

"By Jove, I should think it is!" rejoined the Premier. "Nùlma has grown up a little beauty. But what do you mean, Goodeve, by hinting that

your daughter mayn't be as good in every way as she is to look at? You are not disparaging her moral character, I hope?"

"No, thank God! There never was a sweeter or better girl than my Nùlma. A bit of a temper—and a will of her own, too, I can tell you!—but who ever heard of a real woman without them?"

"Well, then, look here: I'm not going to have my favourite Nùlma belittled. She's perfection, and there's an end of it."

Goodeve shook his big shoulders, and his face beamed.

"We won't say much about book-learning, however," he said. "I've kept her back, and done it on purpose, too. I wasn't going to have her spoiled at one of your Sydney or Melbourne boarding-schools—turned into a fine lady, and taught to think herself too good for her old father. No, I wasn't going to have that."

"And quite right, Goodeve," put in a gentleman who was standing behind the Premier, and had pricked up his ears at the mention of Nùlma. "Not that there was any likelihood, I should say, of what you seemed afraid of; but I'm not fond myself of a boarding-school education—it's a Brummagem sort of imitation of the real thing, and I'm glad Miss Nùlma hasn't had it. By the way, has she had time to try the new horse yet?"

"She is waiting for you, Van Vechten, to come and take her out. No, it isn't that, but little Luce

Perryman has had an accident—hurt her back—and has to keep lying down all the time. So Nülmá has been over with her a lot, nursing and cheering her up. I say, can't you come out to the Bunyas on Saturday. You might go for a ride with us, and stop to dinner—we'll be glad to see you."

"Thank you," replied Van Vechten. "Yes, I will come with pleasure."

"All right, I'll tell Lulu. Now, I suppose I had better try to make myself agreeable to some of these big-wigs? What do you think of our new Chief Justice?" And he glanced over to where Kenward was talking on the other side of the deck to one of the Leichardt's Town legal luminaries.

"Looks a man," returned Van Vechten shortly. "The old one was a molly-coddle."

"Yes," assented Goodeve. "Anyhow, *he* is not a molly-coddle, though they say he has come out for his health. You'll not be up at the swearing-in business like the rest of us? Lucky for you that you ain't a 'responsible adviser'! I'll be glad when the fuss and botheration are over and we settle down to work again."

And the big man moved off.

The other remained for a minute or two, his clean-shaved, stern face softened by the shadow of that smile which had come upon it when he began to talk of Nülmá. It was a face which somehow suggested a Middle Age carving in very old and ancient ivory; the skin, a blending of brown

and yellow, was drawn tightly over the bridge of the straight nose and the rather high cheek-bones, having a number of tiny wrinkles at the corners of the eyes and between the nostrils and chin. It would have been difficult to guess Van Vechten's age. He might have been anything between fifty-five and twenty-five, for there was a kind of immovableness about his features and expression which defied the ravages of time. His stolidity, however, was that of strength, not of weakness. Van Vechten had sometimes been called a man of iron. He had an inflexible will, a contempt for public opinion, and rigidly exacted the full meed in all his dealings with others. He was severe, but he was also just. His blue eyes were sharp as steel, but they were honest as those of James Goodeve, which is saying much.

He was a merchant of Dutch extraction, as his name told, who had amassed a large fortune, and owned one of the handsomest houses in Leichardt's Town. Sir John Randal had made him a member of the Upper House, but he took no part in political affairs. His whole business appeared to be the making of money, and he succeeded in it admirably. He had not married, and till the last year of Lady Randal's reign had hardly been known socially. Certainly he had never gone to Government House, or to any of the dances, public or private. Then Lady Randal had discovered in him the anonymous benefactor of a charity in which

she was interested, had taken a fancy to the man, and had insisted upon his calling upon her. She was a very clever, sympathetic woman, had known how to get hold of him, and had thought it worth her while to do so. Gradually he became a frequent visitor at Government House, and Lady Randal had done her best to marry him to her own greatest friend in Leichardt's Land—a certain Miss Degraves. Miss Degraves would, report said, have been quite willing to become Mrs. Van Vechten, for, though the merchant had, as he frankly owned, worked his own way upwards, he was incontestably a gentleman, and his very reserve gave him dignity, while it carried an impression of power. As soon as he became aware of Lady Randal's design, he went to her with characteristic independence, thanking her for her good intentions, and assuring her that he had no intention of marrying anyone, except a little girl, now just seventeen, who hadn't the faintest notion of his wishes, whose great trouble was that she couldn't learn to spell, and who was the best lady-rider Leichardt's Land had ever produced.

Lady Randal had asked who the girl was, and he had replied with perfect frankness that it was Nùlma Goodeve. Till then Lady Randal had never heard of Nùlma Goodeve, or little Lulu, as her playmates the Perrymans called her; nor had anyone else in Leichardt's Town, except these same Perrymans, who lived in the next house to the

Goodeves, and one or two others, among them Mr. Latham—not then the Premier. Mr. Latham had been an employer of James Goodeve, in the days when Nùlma's father had been a carrier out west, between the further stations and Port Victoria, before he had struck gold and become the chief shareholder in the “Goodeve's Consolation” reef.

Lady Randal, who liked pulling the social wires, had tried to get at Nùlma through her father, and had made advances to the burly member of Assembly, just then coming into prominence as a politician, too wealthy to care for place, and too sturdily independent to snatch at power. But James Goodeve had rebuffed the advance, and had told Lady Randal, almost rudely, that his daughter wasn't coming out in society for a year yet, which would be after the Randals' term of office had expired, and that he didn't want her taken notice of by fine ladies till she was old enough to keep her head and not be spoiled by it. But he was flattered, all the same; he set more store than ever upon Nùlma in consequence, being now quite sure that the girl must be no common girl; and though he did not go to Government House, he always declared himself afterwards one of Lady Randal's most devoted admirers.

Lady Arthur had heard the little talk about Nùlma, which had taken place not far from where she was standing with the Acting Governor absently admiring the low stretches of banana and

pineapple plantations on each side of the river; the heights covered with gum-tree forests; and, as the launch got higher, the pretty bungalow residences, with their green paddocks and gardens and beautiful clumps of bamboos.

The conversation, somehow, struck an unpleasing chord; for the description of Nùlma seemed to chime with her vaguely-expressed dread of the evening before, concerning a possible unsophisticated rival in the Chief Justice's heart. But she scented a romance, being a woman of that emotional temperament to whom life must always present itself in the guise of romance or drama rather than of prosaic fact. In truth, that emotional tendency had been her undoing. Now, however, it made her jump at the conclusion that Mr. Van Vechten was in love with this unknown Nùlma.

Van Vechten attracted her. Though totally unlike, there was yet a certain type resemblance between him and the Chief Justice. Both had the same air of suppressed force, and both shared a certain outward hardness; but the flexible curves of Kenward's lips gave token of a keener susceptibility to subtler influences than was the case with Van Vechten. Lady Arthur asked presently who the merchant was, and receiving from the Acting Governor an abridged biography of him as far as the Leichardtstonians knew it, she resolved to cultivate Van Vechten, and requested that he might be presented to her.

"Whose is that big house?" she asked him, pointing to an imposing two-storied building commandingly situated upon a rise overlooking the bend of the river as it curved round a long low point in a snake-like loop. This house was particularly noticeable because of an enormous and solitary clump of bamboos growing on the extreme point of the hill, where it looked like a plume of gigantic green feathers.

"That is my house," answered Van Vechten simply.

Lady Arthur now began to wonder if he were married; she had not received that information from the Acting Governor. "I hope that you will ask me there sometimes," she said. "You must have a magnificent view of the river."

"You do me honour," he replied with a formal bow. "We can look down upon Government House from my veranda," he went on. "And there, Lady Arthur, I think you catch your first glimpse of your future home." He pointed to a white patch surrounded with greenery, lying parallel with the Botanical Gardens at the end of a second point where the river made another loop; the white patch resolved itself into a balconied stone building with great pillars and four deep porches.

"It looks very cool," said Lady Arthur. "And it seems new," she added.

"Of course it is new," replied Van Vechten; "it was built for the Randa's."

The Governor came up and offered his arm to his niece-in-law, so that she might view her new residence to better advantage from the crimson carpeted patch of the deck on which the state chairs had been placed. They were getting close to the town; the vessels in the river dipped flags; the guns of the battery fired a salute; the crowd lining the temporary quay on which the Governor was to be received was plainly visible.

And now began what James Goodeve had termed the "fuss and botheration." The naval and military force of the baby colony, represented by the officers of the survey schooner and man-of-war which had brought up the party, and the local militia and police brigade, drew up in line. The Ministers and officials ranged themselves; the Mayor delivered an address. Lord Arthur and the aide-de-camp, in their red uniforms, stood like statues, a little back on each side of their chief, while the presentations were going on. Lord Arthur looked distinguished, if not particularly brilliant; his face wore a bored expression, and his hand fidgeted with the hilt of his sword. The aide-de-camp, a good-looking young soldier with a dark moustache, who was very sorry for himself, and felt the heat horribly, would have given worlds to get out of his uniform into white ducks, and to order an iced whisky-and-seltzer. The Governor looked bored, too, and hot, but was mechanically gracious, though, under cover of

his galvanized smile, he whispered to Lord Arthur:

"Can't you give them a hint to cut it short? I shall have a sunstroke if there's much more of this."

The crowd cheered; the Leichardtstonians thought it all very fine, and would have liked to prolong the function. In the raised seats round the platform Lady Arthur noticed some well-dressed women and some extremely pretty girls, and began to readjust her preconceived notions about colonial society.

"Lady Randal has got them into good training," she thought, not realizing that many of these ladies were better born, and had come out of a severer nursery than had she herself. She had the consciousness of being an object of the most rigid scrutiny, and wondered what these matrons and maids were thinking about her. The mimic sovereignty was amusing and gratifying to a woman who, though she was a Marquis's daughter-in-law, had always been poor, and never as certain of her position as she could have wished. She was glad that Kenward should see her thus, the "cynosure of all eyes," as the society correspondent of the Leichardt's Land Herald put it the next morning. She bent her head sideways over the bouquet which the Mayor's daughter had presented to her, and while the thought crossed her mind that these stephanotis flowers and other tropical blossoms of which it was composed would fetch an almost fabu-

lous price at this moment in Covent Garden, she tried to crane her head round to catch a glimpse of the Chief Justice, who would shortly have his own little performance of installation to go through. He was standing, alert, interested, scanning the rows of spectators—perhaps, she thought bitterly, in vague search of that child of Nature—and not thinking in the least of her.

Presently the guns fired another salute. The Governor stepped into the state barouche drawn by four grays, and the procession started: Lady Arthur smiling from under the shadow of her mauve parasol, the Governor making at intervals stiff military salutes, the "staff" in their red uniforms on the back-seat. It was pitilessly hot, now that the breeze had died away, and the procession seemed to be a long time in parading the principal streets. After all, though, there was not a great deal of street, and the town was of a queer, incongruous sort, with patches of *cida retusa* where there should have been shops or houses—a wooden shanty standing beside a big public building, and a little weather-board and iron store elbowing the pillars of a bank. At last they had passed the white stone, zinc-roofed pile which somebody told Lady Arthur was the Parliamentary Buildings, had gone through the iron gates of the Government House domain, and were drawn up in front of the new-looking portico and the brass-studded door through which she entered into her kingdom.

CHAPTER III.

IN THE PIAZZA.

LADY ARTHUR spent most of the afternoon in helping her maid to unpack, in arranging photographs and knick-knacks about her own rooms, and in giving orders. Several of the servants had been with the Randals; but Lady Arthur determined that she would not be dogged by Lady Randal's ghost more than was absolutely necessary, and settled within herself that she would have them dismissed as soon as she creditably and comfortably could. In the meantime, however, she was very sweet and gracious to them, thus finding out indirectly something of what was expected of her, and she had pleasant words for the gardeners employed in setting ferns and palms. Down below, the Governor, his staff and responsible advisers, were occupied with the business of the installation and of a cold collation, from which a not too sumptuous portion was served to Lady Arthur in the deep stone piazza outside the staircase gallery, which she resolved to appropriate as a summer sitting-

room. She was lying in a cane lounge dressed in a cool tea-gown, a litter of unpacking round her, when Lord Arthur appeared hot and tired, and still in uniform.

"Where have my things been put, Margot? I want to get out of this abominable toggery. There should be a dispensation for white ducks on official occasions in all latitudes within twenty-five degrees. Have you settled on our quarters?"

"I've left the Governor what look like the state apartments, and I've established myself in these. Your room is beyond there." She pointed through a cool, shady chamber, in which her maid was occupied over the trunks, to another chamber opening off the side-balcony. "I suppose it's all right."

"Oh—well! Yes, I suppose it's all right. Do send Maling to forage for some tea. It's a regular case of foraging, and the chief is pretty furious about the household arrangements. I've sent a wire to Melbourne for that *chef*; the Governor don't approve of the one provided by his responsible advisers. Judging by the way the responsible advisers gobbled down the most villainous mayonnaise you ever tasted, I should say they didn't know a good dinner when they got it."

"Yes, the mayonnaise *was* villainous!" assented Lady Arthur.

Her husband left her; and after ordering the tea, Margot remained stretched upon her lounge,

lost, it seemed, in painful thought, till he returned, looking all the fresher for a sluicing with cold water, and a change from his stiff trappings into a light summer suit. Maling had brought the tea, and his wife poured him out a cup.

"Where is Mr. Kenward?" she asked.

"Oh, he has gone to forage on his own account. The Governor asked him to stay here, but he seemed to think he had better settle himself in his diggings."

Lord Arthur sipped his tea reflectively.

"Do you think you will like it, Margot?"

"How do I know yet? It is terribly hot."

"To-day; but that won't last. Next month winter will be coming on. Winter in April! Queer, isn't it? Oh, this isn't hot! If you had been with me in India, you wouldn't have thought anything of it."

"I am very sorry that I was not with you in India," she exclaimed, with a vehemence born of her late musings. "I wish with all my heart I had gone with you to India."

"Why, Margot? Oh—well, so am I! But it would have pretty well done for you in the state of health you were in then. And, besides, there was the baby." He sighed. "Not that that would have made any difference in the long-run."

"Who knows? In India it might not have died."

"Poor little shaver! Well, there's no use think-

ing of that now. Perhaps—perhaps there may be another baby some day, Margot."

He hesitated with an almost boyish embarrassment, and gave a little tender laugh as he put out his hand and played with the lace of her tea-gown. Her lips tightened, and the lines in her face seemed to deepen, so that at the moment she looked ever so much older than her husband. As a matter of fact, there were three years between them, he being twenty-nine and she thirty-two. She shook her head with intense decision. There was a silence. He stopped stroking her tea-gown, and leaned back with a hurt look on his fair, stolid face. Presently he said, in the tone of a man who has mastered a momentary emotion:

"I shall be very happy, Margot, when we have settled down again into respectable married life, as it used to be."

"I think we have settled down quite respectably enough," she answered. "I don't know what you want more."

"I want a great deal more," he rejoined; and there was another silence, which she occupied in peeling a banana.

She broke it, saying:

"I don't think these bananas are as good as what we had on board."

He took no notice of the remark.

"Margot," he exclaimed, with slow impetuosity, "what is it?"

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"I sometimes wonder," he answered, "whether you care for me as much as you did three years ago—before I went to India."

"Why should I not care for you as much as I did then? Don't be absurd, Arthur, and fancy things which are not true."

"Aren't they true? Oh, I hope they are not! But you have so changed. I suppose," he added, "it is from your having been ill."

"Yes, if I am changed. But I don't see where the change comes in."

"Oh yes, you have changed, and you must know it, unless it's all your illness. Sir Alured told me that it takes years sometimes to get over a bad illness like that."

"Yes; years, and years, and years. Don't talk of it. Will you have some more tea?"

"Thank you!" He swallowed what was left in the cup and handed it to her. "By Jove! that's the best thing I've had in Government House yet. It's Ceylon tea, isn't it?"

"It isn't a Government House production; it is some that"—she made the slightest pause—"that Mr. Kenward got for me in Galle. Maling had packed it away by mistake."

"Well, it's very good." He drank it slowly. "Margot," he resumed, "you are sure that you have not changed to me?"

"Quite sure. Please don't talk like that."

"I can't help it; it's always in my mind—has been ever since I came home—and we have seemed so—so separate. And, then, two years is a big slice out of five of married life—big enough for a woman to find out in it that she likes somebody else better than her husband."

Margot Keefe gave a quick, frightened glance towards her husband, who was not then looking at her, however, but was staring out through the half-drawn venetians of the balcony.

"Arthur, what makes you say that?" she asked in desperate bravery. "Have you been fancying such a thing about me?"

"No—yes; I'll make a clean breast of it, Margot."

"Well?" she said sharply.

"It's this: when I first came home, and you seemed so cold—not that exactly, but you know what I mean—and when I saw how thick you and Kenward were—"

"Well?"

"Don't be angry, dear. You know that I never could suspect you of anything not absolutely on the square, and now I see that I was a jealous fool. But I did wonder at first whether he hadn't got to care for you, and you for him."

"Well?" she repeated. She seemed unable to utter any other word.

"Oh, well, didn't I tell you that I saw I was a jealous fool? and of course I ought to have had

more consideration for you. But it's hard for a blundering fellow like me, who never had sisters or much to do with womenkind, to understand women. What made me certain that I was just a jealous fool was his accepting this appointment here, and your wanting him to come out with us."

"Ah! Go on, Arthur."

"I knew that, if there had ever been anything more than ordinary friendship between you, you would never have put yourselves into the position. You are too good a woman, Margot, and he is too much of a gentleman for that sort of thing. Look out, dear—what is it?"

For she had started suddenly from the lounge, and was bending over it, her back to him.

"I thought I saw—was it a tarantula or a centipede or something? They say there are lots of such creatures out here," she cried hysterically. "Oh, it's a bit of banana peel. I'm dreadfully stupid, Arthur. I hate hot climates and insects and things."

"You're nervous, dear, and I've been upsetting you. Don't you bother, Margot, about anything I've said. I mean to be tremendously patient and considerate with you; we are going to be ever so happy here, and you'll get as strong as you ever were." He waited, and then added in a different tone, "I say, I think it would be nice if I were to go and get the chief to come and have tea up here with you; he'd like it; he's awfully devoted

to you; it's such a good thing he has taken to you so immensely."

"Yes, go, Arthur." She called him back as he was leaving. "You *are* a good fellow; you are a great deal too good for me. Don't think I am not grateful, but don't—don't talk any more like that, and don't set your heart on what isn't in the nature of things, and can't be. I shall never be any different—not for a long, long time, anyhow. You must take me as I am, and not expect too much from me, for it's of no use. Promise me."

"Promise—what?"

"That you'll be good friends with me, and not say anything like that."

"I can certainly promise to be good friends. I can't answer for other things, but I'll do my best. You see, Margot"—he came close to her, and, stooping, kissed her forehead—"a fellow would like to be something more than just good friends with the one woman in the world that he loves."

"Oh, that is where it is." She gave a slight shudder. "It is so dreadful to be loved in that tragic way; one didn't expect it from you."

"No, I suppose you thought I was too matter-of-fact a sort of chap; and so I am about everything but you, Margot. I can't help it. I'm pretty cool about most things, and not given to sentiment and tall talk, but I got to know one thing about myself when I came back this time."

"What was that?" she asked faintly.

"It's all over—didn't last, as I said—but I can assure you that for a day or two there was a raging devil in me, which under certain circumstances would have made me commit murder, and glory in it."

She turned very pale.

"I—I never guessed that."

"No, I didn't mean that you should. I'm a pretty good hand at keeping things to myself; and if I choose I can put the stopper in and show nothing. I don't know why I am telling you now; but it's a fact, Margot: there's more in me than you bargained for, and if you ever deceived me—which God forbid!—you'd find it out."

She looked after him, as he moved away, in silent and frightened wonder. Turning at the door, he caught the look, and hastened to reassure her:

"I believe I've scared you. What a brute I am! Never mind, Margot dear. I'm not a bit afraid of your doing anything to rouse the Tartar. Scratch a Russian, you know. I've got a dash of my mother's blood, though I seem such a John Bull."

He gave his blonde moustache a twirl, and laughed good-humouredly as he disappeared. She heard him going heavily down the uncarpeted stairs. The suggestion of that Kalmuck strain in her husband roused a new and not altogether pleasant train of thought. It was so very unusual in him to allude to it, and there had never been anything to remind her that he was not wholly English. It

was now almost forgotten that the second wife of the Marquis of Kelvin had been a Russian, and was, in truth, a very unimportant fact, seeing that she had only lived long enough to give birth to this, her first, and Lord Kelvin's fourth, son. But it struck Margot—and, indeed, the same thing had occurred to her once or twice lately—that there were passionate, vengeful capabilities latent in the man she had married, for which, as he had just said, she had not bargained. A sort of soul-panic took possession of the poor woman. This sudden plunge into a new life amid surroundings totally unfamiliar to her made her lose for the moment her mental foothold. She was frightened at what she had done, at what she might be going to do. Her husband's revelation of his brooding suspicions, the appeal which he had made, his assertion of belief in her honour and in that of Kenward, had startled and appalled her. For one instant she had been on the point of flinging herself at his feet and confessing that his suspicions were justified. It seemed to her impossible that she could go on living so base a lie. Why had she not yielded to the promptings of her better self and made this new departure a means of entire rupture with the feverish joy of those two years of freedom? How could she have been so mad and so wicked as to bring her past with her when she had a chance of flinging it behind for ever? Why had she not urged Kenward to try for another appointment, to go to some

other place where he might recover his health—and forget her? Ah! that was the sting. But anything rather than to have brought him here, a step of which there could be but two interpretations—that of entire innocence or of the worst dishonour. Strangely enough, she had not, till her husband so spoke to-day, regarded the matter in this tragic light—a light which she now knew to be the just one. His words had brought her self-knowledge, and she was convicted by her own conscience of playing a despicable part. It was the meanness of it that she hated.

And then the danger. She seemed to see before her a forewarning vision of consequences and of resistless working of forces which till now had only existed for her between the leaves of a novel or on the stage of a theatre. She had married as women who are poor, and eager to raise themselves socially, do marry when opportunity occurs. She had lived a hand-to-mouth, a somewhat Bohemian sort of girlhood, and it had been at first excitement enough to find herself lifted into a sphere of which she had only read in books. She had been tactful and had held her own, and even in her tiny London house had managed to make herself an influence in a small way. There had been excitement in that too. Then had come the baby's birth, the illness which Lord Arthur charitably made the excuse for everything in her which troubled and perplexed him; afterward, before she had recovered, his

departure with his regiment to India; and a little later had begun the drama of Marguerite Keefe's life.

She had taken her marriage and her husband as part of the prose of existence—solid material facts, which there was no necessity to analyze. She had looked upon Lord Arthur as a well-bred, rather stupid Briton, outside the region of romance, who would always be satisfied with that limited portion of her real self presented to him, and whose unemotional temperament would not rebel against any conditions she chose to impose. She vaguely concluded that after a few years of marriage they would get like other couples she knew of, and both go pretty much their own way—if, indeed, she thought at all about the matter; she had never realized the true nature of his feeling for her, and had not speculated closely upon how he would or would not act under certain circumstances at which he had just hinted. During the two years of his absence her growing intimacy with Outram Kenward had engrossed her to the exclusion of all other considerations. She had looked neither behind nor before, and it was not till Lord Arthur's rather sudden return that she had found herself face to face with the problem which has tormented many another woman like herself—a woman not vicious, not even heartless, and not without a sense of the obligations of honour, but whose misfortune it has been in the first instance to marry a man she did not love, and the second to meet too late, and when

away from her husband's protecting influence, the one man who must be for ever her heart's master.

So things had been when, almost immediately upon the crisis, this Leichardt's Land plan had been mooted and determined upon. The poor trapped creature—trapped in the net of her passionate impulses and surprised by circumstance; not actually bad, but very far from being good, and who, though incapable of any heroic resolve, yet shrank from deliberate baseness, torn by emotion and for the first time by piercing doubt of the man she loved—had frantically waited for Kenward to take the initiative. But he had not taken it. She would have run away with him had he asked her, sacrificing all the prospects before so dear to her; but he had not asked her, and she had understood without words that she was not worth to him the sacrifice of his own career. She heard rumours of an engagement with a wealthy cousin, and jealousy made her desperate. There had been an appeal to the man's chivalry and to a tenderness by no means extinguished. It had been partly through her instrumentality that the appointment of Chief Justice had been offered to him. He had yielded to her entreaties to accompany them; and the impossible resolve had been made to keep within barriers and to enjoy each other's society in a purely platonic fashion. All through the voyage they had been very good friends—too good friends, as Margot in her bitterness expressed it.

She had never till now faced the situation. The transition stage had been all rush and movement, with the interest of new scenes and of preparations for a different life to distract both. But the long days of lazy gliding through Southern seas had brought reaction. To Kenward, though he would not admit it, as well as to Margot, thought meant corroding dissatisfaction. It sometimes appeared to him, as well as to her, that they were like creatures who had rushed headlong under a yoke, and now must go whither Fate, the driver, willed. To Margot, in this hour of dread and humiliation, stolid, prosaic Lord Arthur seemed suddenly to have been turned into an almost grotesque embodiment of Destiny. And then she laughed grimly aloud at the notion of Lord Arthur as an Othello.

"What amuses you so much, my dear?" said the Governor's neutral, tired voice near her.

"I don't know," she answered, with a violent start, speaking at haphazard. "I think it was the Mayor's way of reading the address."

"Ah," said the Governor, "it's your first experience of the kind of thing. I dare say that solemn procession through the town seemed very funny to you. It did to me. But I"—he sighed—"I have suffered in the same way several times before, and the humour of it palls a little."

CHAPTER IV.

NÙLMA'S COMPACT.

NÙLMA was walking to and fro upon the veranda at the Bunyas, when Mr. Van Vechten, in the free-and-easy manner of an Australian visitor certain of his welcome, ushered himself in through the drawing-room and stood looking at her from the sill of the open French window.

She was pacing up and down with the free, stately tread of a stag or some other graceful wild animal. There was, in truth, a strong suggestion of the stag in her whole appearance: in the poise of her small head with its untidy hair, the colour of a ripe bunya nut; in the slenderness of her immature form, her thin neck and the slim arms from which her loose muslin sleeves fell away; while her big brown eyes, too, had something of the shy fearlessness and liquid softness of a young deer's glance. She was a very attractive child, who would shortly be a beautiful woman, and James Goodeve was perfectly justified in his fatherly admiration.

One hand clasped her belt behind her back;

the other held in front a book which looked like a tattered primer. She was murmuring softly to herself as she walked, gazing conscientiously beyond the page.

"P-a-r-a-l—oh, *are* there two l's? P-a-r-a-l—" a hurried, guilty glance at the page—"l-a-x—Parallax. My goodness gracious! what *is* a parallax?" Another glance. "Yes; oh, well, I needn't bother to remember *that*. Pa-r-a-l—l-l?—P-a-r-a-l-l-e-l—Parallel—Oh, Mr. Van Vechten, how you made me jump!"

"What are you doing, Nülmá?"

"I'm learning my spelling lesson. I do a page every day. Mrs. Perryman says it is disgraceful that a girl who's coming out in May, and has done with schooling, shouldn't know how to spell properly."

"Oh, does she indeed?"

"I wrote her a note yesterday to ask about Luce, and it had two frightful mistakes. It's no use; I shall never learn to spell! Uncle Van, did you hear about poor Luce?"

"I heard she had had an accident."

"Nobody knows when she will stand up again," said Nülmá, with tragic emphasis. "She has crinkled her back."

"Crinkled her back!"

"Twisted her spine-joints, somehow. I shall never forgive Malcolm Derrett—never, as long as I live."

"Why is that, Nùlma?"

"He won't own up to it—before people. But I know—I *know* how it was." Nùlma pursed up her chin and narrowed her eyes with an air of mystery, as though she possessed supernatural sources of information. "The truth is, I made him confess it to me," she added, in a burst of candour. "It was this way: He was jealous because Luce was offended with him and refused to dance with him, and because she liked dancing with Victor De-graves. It was her birthday-party last week, you know. So Malcolm thought he'd pay her out and make her and Victor ridiculous, and he just left a bit of orange-peel on the veranda, and they slipped on it, and Luce fell against the steps and hurt her back. Oh, she has been in such pain; and I should like to *kill* Malcolm Derrett, though he comes crying to me every day to know if she is better."

"Are you so hard-hearted as all that, Nùlma? Wouldn't you forgive a person for doing wrong if he suffered real remorse for having done it?"

"I would never forgive anyone for doing a mean, underhand thing on purpose to hurt someone else. If it had hurt me myself—well, I'd punish them if I could."

"And if you couldn't?"

"I'd not stop till I had got someone else to do it for me."

Nùlma straightened herself against the veranda-post as she enunciated this vindictive sentiment,

and her eyes emitted a light which was almost savage, and was to Van Vechten a new revelation, had he needed one, of her character. She had unconsciously crunched up the spelling-book in her vehemence, and now tossed it on to a squatter's chair with a laugh.

"There! I shan't learn any more to-day."

"Nùlma," said Van Vechten, with a hesitating deference curious in one so much older and so self-sufficing and composed, "I want you to tell me something. You say you would never forgive a deliberate wrong committed against yourself. But suppose someone did you a great wrong—not deliberately?"

"I don't think I understand what sort of wrong you mean, Mr. Van Vechten," answered Nùlma, with one of her quick, straight glances.

"Suppose, for instance, that someone for his own purpose—not meaning you harm, but because he cared for you, and wished to secure you for himself—persuaded you to sign a bond, of which you were too young and inexperienced to understand the nature, a bond that would tie you down for your whole life; and suppose that, when it was too late, you got to realize what you had done, and regretted it bitterly—well, would you forgive the person who had dealt you that wrong, out of his great love for you?"

"I should not call that love for me," answered Nùlma. "If the person loved me, he would wait

till he knew I understood what I was doing; and then, if he loved me, he wouldn't want me to sign anything unless it were of my own free will."

"But you haven't answered my question, Nùlma. Would you forgive him?"

"I don't know," she said. "Perhaps; but I think I should hate him ever afterwards for having put me into prison. It would be putting a girl into prison, wouldn't it, if you took away her liberty, and prevented her from choosing the kind of life which would suit her best?"

"Yes; it would be putting her into prison," he said slowly. "You are right, my dear: if a man really loved the girl, he would wait till of her own free will she chose to do what he wished."

"And if she never chose to do it?" counter-questioned Nùlma mischievously, and her smile made him wonder whether she could have guessed the real drift of his words.

"Ah, well, he would have lost his chance, and would have to let her go her own way, apart from him. Nùlma," he added, in a different tone, "where's his mightiness the Minister for Mines? I thought we were going for a ride this afternoon."

"His mightiness told me to tell you that he is very sorry, but he forgot all about a meeting he has got to attend—something about the water-works. He said you would understand."

"Yes, I know. Well, did he say anything else? What about the Arab?"

"He said I could go with you and try him. I was going to ride him the day the Governor came, but daddy said there would be bands and flags and things all about, and that I'd better not."

"All right. I've got the roan outside. I'll tell them, shall I, to saddle Emin?"

"I expect he is saddled already; and I should have been in my habit by now if you hadn't interrupted me at my spelling. I shan't be ten minutes. Uncle Van"—pausing—"do you think we could go into town and get some cocoanut-candy for Luce? She does so love cocoanut-candy!"

"I've anticipated your wishes, Nùlma. But it isn't cocoanut-candy. See here!" He went into the drawing-room, and brought out from the table where he had laid it a box of French chocolate tied with blue ribbons.

Nùlma opened it eagerly.

"Budgery you! Oh dear! excuse Blacks' language; it expresses my feelings." She perched herself on the railing of the veranda, and proceeded to crunch bonbons. "If ever I marry," she announced, "it will be a pastry-cook or an importer of sweeties. You import sweeties, don't you, Uncle Van?" she went on, with maddening unconsciousness. "Isn't that the good of being a merchant, that you can have shiploads of everything ready to hand?"

"I am afraid that I don't import French chocolate, Nùlma. I wish I did, for then I could give

you a larger choice than one can have in Leichardt's Town."

"But I like Leichardt's Town sweeties; and I think these are quite delicious," said Nùlma impartially. "Besides, there's always cocoanut-candy, which is as good as anything, if it isn't very high-class. Now, I am not going to eat one more." She tied the ribbons with decision. "These are going to Luce; and we'll stop at Wirrib and leave them on our way, if you please."

He agreed. There was nothing Nùlma wished to which he would not agree; but he disliked Mrs. Perryman, who was a draggled-looking lady with a large family, and not many good words for her neighbours. But Luce Perryman was Nùlma's most intimate friend, and Mrs. Perryman somehow reminded James Goodeve of his dead wife, about whom there had been a tragic story. So, out of sentiment hardly to be expected in one so matter-of-fact, though quite aware of Mrs. Perryman's shortcomings in the social sense, he allowed his daughter to depend upon her a good deal for such chaperonage as was necessary when he himself was in the House of Assembly or otherwise occupied. Mr. Goodeve hated society, probably because he felt himself ill at ease in it, and he looked forward with inward groaning to the time when Nùlma should come out, and, of course, wish to go to balls and entertainments generally. As yet, Nùlma went to no parties but those at the Perrymans', which were

not formal, grown-up affairs. There were, however, other occasions when her father desired for her the countenance of some older woman. With a fastidiousness not altogether in keeping with his antecedents, he sternly set his face against the prevailing fashion among Leichardt's Town young ladies, of parading Victoria Street in the afternoons, and of hanging about the ice-cream shop where the young gentlemen were wont to lounge after office hours, and which became the scene of more or less pronounced flirtation.

Mr. Goodeve was determined that his daughter should never make herself cheap in this manner, and Nùlma was forbidden ever to walk in Leichardt's Town unless Mrs. Perryman or some married woman were with her. Nùlma did not know any other married woman, and so when the girl wanted to do shopping, Mrs. Perryman, with outward grumbling but inward satisfaction, would don her shabby black mantle, rusty lace bonnet, and, with skirts trailing in the dust, would pant along in the heat if it were summer, or less laboriously if it were winter, beside Nùlma and her own Luce; and they would catch the tram at the corner and spend the afternoon going from one shop to another, winding up with the ice-cream shop, where Nùlma had an opportunity of observing the demeanour of other young ladies already out and on their promotion. She also heard a good deal of gossip while she was eating ices and sweets, for Mrs. Perryman loved

to talk; and she became conscious, too, that the young gentlemen from the offices eyed her with admiration; and thus she gained her first faint realization of the fact that she was pretty. When not with Mrs. Perryman, she was obliged to content herself with Luce's descriptions of the delights of Victoria Street in the afternoons, for Mrs. Perryman was not so particular about her daughter as Mr. Goodeve was about his. She had a good many others coming on, and it was an object to her to marry the elder ones as soon as possible, whereas Mr. Goodeve had only one, and was particularly anxious that Nülmá should not marry—at any rate, too soon. There was no reason why she should marry. If Mr. Goodeve did not lose his money by speculation, she would be a rich woman in time. He had turned Goodeve's Consolation into a company at the height of the boom, and was known to be shrewd and prudent, so that Nülmá's prospects were pretty well assured, and she was a desirable match. Of this fact her father was aware, and he did his best to make people believe he was not a rich man. He avoided outward show, made his girl dress plainly, and would not allow her to have her own pony-carriage, which last was a standing grievance to Mrs. Perryman, as she knew that she would have had the use of it. Mr. Perryman was the head of the Mines department under the Minister, but he had no private means, and could not afford his wife a buggy, far less a victoria, which was her

ambition. He fully understood the advantages of being on good terms with Ministers, present, past, and future, and so he, too, was one of those who conspired in the spoiling of Nùlma.

Mrs. Perryman was sitting in the veranda at Wirrib, as their place was called, after a fashion happily not then in disuse, of native nomenclature. Wirrib in the Blacks' language means a parrot, and perhaps, from association of ideas, the Perryman girls were fond of birds, and had several cages about in which were Galah and Blue Mountain parrots, and some pink and white and yellow and white cockatoos. One of these, an ancient, knowing-looking bird, shrieked out at sight of Nùlma: "Lulu, where's your sweetheart? Pretty Cocky! Have a candy."

"Quiet, Cocky!" cried Mrs. Perryman, who seemed more draggled and hotter than usual, dressed in a flowered barège skirt and an untidy jacket. "But the bird knows what he's talking about, doesn't he, Mr. Van Vechten? Well, I am surprised, Lulu, at your father letting you go out without him, and alone with a single gentleman, too!"

"Daddy is busy, Mrs. Perryman."

"And he thinks I am old enough and staid enough to be trusted with Miss Nùlma," put in Mr. Van Vechten stiffly. The merchant did not like Mrs. Perryman.

"Oh, I have no doubt Mr. Goodeve knows what

he is about," retorted Mrs. Perryman. "But we shall have all the young ladies of Leichardt's Town jealous, if Nülda monopolizes the catch of the place. What will Miss Degraves say? I hear she is determined not to be ousted from Government House, and that she has tacked herself already on to Lady Arthur Keefe."

" You know everything, Mrs. Perryman," said Mr. Van Vechten. " I hope your daughter is going on all right. I was very sorry to hear of her accident."

Whereupon Mrs. Perryman launched into a long account of her feelings when the party had broken up on account of Luce's fall. She complained also of the inconvenience Luce's illness caused, and of the additional cost in doctor's fees entailed by Wirrib being beyond the town radius.

" How Dr. Clayton can reconcile it to his conscience to charge by the mile, as if he were a London physician, is a wonder to me," said Mrs. Perryman, " seeing that all his patients live out of town. Do the doctors suppose that we are going to steam ourselves in Leichardt's Town just because of them? It will come to that for the poor people, or else we must physic ourselves—and I call it short-sighted policy on the part of the doctors."

" I suppose they have to pay for their horses?" said Mr. Van Vechten.

Then Mrs. Perryman talked of the origin of the accident, and declared that if she could only

find out who had laid that bit of orange-peel—for she was convinced that it had been set on purpose—she would make Mr. Perryman bring an action for damages against the parents of the offender. Mr. Van Vechten noticed that Nùlma screwed up her lips tighter and that her eyes flashed again, but she never said a word; and Van Vechten conceived an even greater admiration than he already entertained for his young friend's loyalty, even to an enemy, as well as for her discretion. It was satisfactory to know that Nùlma at least would not do a mean thing, or betray a confidence, though the confidence had been made to her by a person whom she wished to punish. Nùlma, impatient, threw the little box of chocolate into Mrs. Perryman's lap.

"Catch!" she cried. "It's for Luce, with my love; and you are to be sure and say that Mr. Van Vechten brought it."

"For you?" said Mrs. Perryman meaningly. "Fie! Receiving presents from a gentleman! What will your father say? and he's so down upon Luce for taking so much as an ice-cream at any of those young gentlemen's expense. But you are a privileged person, I suppose, Mr. Van Vechten?"

"I hope so," returned Van Vechten haughtily. "Miss Nùlma, if we are to have anything of a ride, we'd better get on."

Nùlma left a tender message for Luce, to the effect that she would come round for a minute or

two after dinner that evening, and they rode off, Mrs. Perryman calling out after Van Vechten:

"I suppose we shall see you at the Government House reception on Wednesday, unless you mean to retire into your shell again now that Lady Randal has gone? We are all going to pay our respects to Lady Arthur Keefe."

"I certainly think I shall retire into my shell," said Van Vechten to Nùlma, only answering Mrs. Perryman with a parting salutation.

"Oh, please don't," answered the girl, "because *I* am going."

"You? Oh, Nùlma, I forgot; you are to be a grown-up young lady after the May ball."

"Yes. And Mrs. Perryman says it's the proper thing for me to go to the reception, and be introduced to Lady Arthur, and write my name in the book—and all the rest; and then I shall be asked properly to the May ball."

"I shouldn't have thought Mrs. Perryman was much of an authority on social matters. But I suppose it's all right. Is it she who is going to take you?"

"Daddy will be there. Mrs. Perryman wants to come with us. We shall have the buggy if daddy takes us. Luce was to have gone. But poor Luce! They don't know if she will be able to come out at the ball now. Uncle Van, tell me—what is Lady Arthur like?"

"She is not as nice as Lady Randal. I wish

it had been in Lady Randal's time that you had been coming out."

"Oh, Lady Randal! I'm getting tired of hearing so much about what I've missed in Lady Randal. Daddy says Lady Arthur is very handsome."

"Didn't you go and see them when they arrived?"

"Mrs. Perryman couldn't leave Luce, and daddy was on duty as one of the Ministers, you know. I am very anxious to see Lady Arthur."

"Why?"

"Oh, I don't know; because she is Lady Arthur, I suppose. It must feel so odd to be a Marquis's daughter-in-law—quite different from being a Nùlma Goodeve."

"I don't suppose you would feel any different from yourself, if a Marquis's son were to come along and marry you. You would still be Nùlma Goodeve."

"No, I shouldn't. I should be Nùlma—something else," she cried, laughing.

"Nùlma," he began eagerly, and added more deliberately, "do you ever wish—do you ever think of being Nùlma anything else?"

"Well, yes—I do," the girl answered fearlessly, though she blushed. "I don't mean that I want to be. But one can't help wondering, you know."

"Wondering what sort of person you will marry: is that it?"

"Well, yes. I suppose I *shall* marry, some day or other."

"I should think it is almost a certainty."

"It's a very serious thing, Mr. Van Vechten."

"Very."

"For a girl; it doesn't matter so much for a man. But for a girl—it's just what you said in the veranda: signing a bond which would tie one down all one's life. I suppose," she added, suddenly giving him her quick, full glance, "I wasn't thinking much about it at the time; but I suppose you meant marrying, didn't you?"

"Yes, I meant marrying. It was rather foolish of me to say anything about it, and perhaps I oughtn't to go on. But I think I'll tell you what I meant, Nùlma—now, before you come out and are a grown-up young lady. You are sure to hear much the same thing then, very soon. What I meant was that, supposing I, being much older than you, yet caring for you more than I have ever cared for any woman in the world, should ask you to marry me?" Nùlma nodded, as though there were nothing unnatural in the proposition. He took courage, and went on more boldly: "Well, Nùlma, suppose this were so. Would it be fair? For, you see, I am more than twice—very nearly three times—your age. I naturally understand the world in a way that you cannot do. I know what love means, and what marriage means; and you, my child, haven't the least idea of either. You have never seen the

man yet whom you could love—tell me truthfully, my dear. Have you ever met any man with whom you could be, as they say, ‘in love’?”

Nùlma checked her horse, which had broken into a jog, reining him in till he walked steadily. The beautiful creature arched its neck under the tightened curb, and she bent forward and patted his mane.

“He’s a beauty, Mr. Van Vechten, but he just wants pacing a bit; he’s as gentle as a lamb. I believe the pretty thing would eat bread out of my hand. I’ll try him when we get home. I had no idea he was so quiet.”

“Do you think I’d put you on anything that wasn’t quiet, Nùlma? But you haven’t answered my question.”

Nùlma pursed up her chin after a way she had when deep in reflection, and seemed to be mentally ticking off the men who had any claim to consideration as possible lovers.

“They mustn’t be married, I suppose?” she asked, as if it were a condition relating to the guessing of a riddle.

“Of course not!” he answered a little sharply, for, in truth, his nerves were strained by the situation. “How could you love anyone who was married?”

“Well, no, I couldn’t, could I? But I was just thinking that if Sir John Randal had ever wanted to marry me, I should have been so pleased.”

"Nùlma! But you never spoke to Sir John Randal, child?"

"No, I didn't," she admitted. "But, then, I've seen him, and, of course, I've heard a great deal about him." She reflected again. "No, I can't think of anyone else. You see, I had always made up my mind that, if I ever fell in love with anyone, it must be an Englishman. I do so want to go to England."

"No other nationality would do, then? Even if the—man who loved you promised to take you to England, and show you every sight there to which money would open the doors?" His voice was choked, though he laughed as though the whole thing were a good joke.

"Oh, but that wouldn't be the same thing," objected Nùlma earnestly. "It wouldn't make him an Englishman—accustomed all his life to ways and ideas like what one reads of in books. I'd like him to have known celebrated people, so that he could talk to me about them. I'd like him to have seen all the great places, and be able to make me feel that I had lived there, too. I'd like him to have heard the best music, and read the best books. I'd like him to have distinguished himself, and to have been accustomed to beautiful and high-born ladies— But, oh, what am I dreaming of?" she cried, pulling herself up short, and the Arab, too, in her excitement. "If he were a man like that, how would he ever come to choose me—

me, that can't even spell correctly or talk grammar!"

"There are other things which make a woman charming besides being able to spell correctly and talk grammatically. In fact, I don't feel sure that a thorough knowledge of spelling is at all indispensable," said Van Vechten. "Well, I think I am answered, Nùlma, all the same, and I won't go on to the other part of my supposings——"

"Oh, but I should like to hear them," she answered, her beautiful face glowing upon his with a cruel unconsciousness. "Of course, I know that you are only pretending just to amuse me, and to make something to talk about. But I should like to hear, all the same."

"No, I wasn't pretending; I was in earnest. Don't be afraid, however"—as he noticed that a look of sorrow and perplexity came over the girl's features—"I'm not going to worry you to marry me!"

"Ah!" The look of perplexity was succeeded by one of relief. She now thought that he could not be in earnest. "I'm so glad. You see, I like you so immensely, Uncle Van; but, of course, that isn't the thing, you know."

"No," he answered, with a sigh, "that isn't the thing, and you were quite right, my dear. If I did persuade you to bind yourself in that way now, before you even knew what the thing means, you'd be justified in hating me all your life afterwards.

But I'd like you to know this, Nùlma," he added, with a dreary sort of laugh, "if ever you find out that it would suit you to marry me, you've only got to tell me so frankly, and you'll make me the proudest and happiest man upon earth."

"You *are* good to me," said the girl, smiling at him with a real gratitude. "That's just how I should want things to be. It sounds funny, doesn't it—the idea of my coming to you and saying that I should like you to marry me? But you could always refuse, you know, if the time ever came and you had changed your mind. I shouldn't feel hurt or offended."

"Oh yes, I could always refuse—you needn't let that trouble you! But I don't think I should refuse, Nùlma. It's a bargain—you promise?"

"Yes, it's a bargain—that is—what does it mean quite, Mr. Van Vechten? Tell me exactly."

"This: I engage on my side to be your good friend. You may consider me as your elder brother, or as a sort of uncle, for the time being—or for always, if you please—at your service in big things and in small. I engage also not to bother you with talk about love or marriage; but you, on your side, engage to come honestly to me, if at any time it suits you—as I said—to marry me, and to tell me so without false pride or hesitation."

"That sounds very easy; I can certainly promise that; and of course it's a bargain. We ought

to shake hands upon it, oughtn't we, if the Arab will let me get close enough."

She pulled her horse, which was docile and answered to the bit, a little nearer to him and held out her hand. They were riding upon a very quiet path, having turned off inland from the river; and on either side were only stretches of gum-trees, with here and there the cottage of a German farmer set in its grove of bananas. Mr. Van Vechten took Nülmá's hand, but instead of merely pressing it, he raised it to his lips. She noticed with some surprise that his calm, sallow face flushed to a deep red as he did so, and that his eyes had a strange look in them as he turned them upon her again.

"Now," he said, "here's a nice bit of soft road. Let us try Emin at a canter. Don't ride him too much on the curb; he doesn't want it."

CHAPTER V.

THE GOVERNMENT HOUSE RECEPTION.

LADY ARTHUR's first reception was necessarily a somewhat formal affair. She had wanted to have it in the garden, but had been overruled by the aide-de-camp, who had pointed out that the crowd would probably be considerable, and that there might be a difficulty over the announcements, and in making clear to her who were the wives and daughters of officials, and the people who might claim from her a greater amount of consideration than the mere common herd. The aide-de-camp, who was new to his work, had taken great pains to get social information, and was extremely anxious that the new reign should begin without mistakes. The Governor had made one already in declining an invitation to a show up-country. He had given the plea that his health hardly permitted him to undergo the fatigue of Bush drives and agricultural functions in the warm weather. The show had been postponed in consequence till the end of April, but there had been much dissatisfaction, and the Radi-

cal paper had had a condemnatory leading article, which was headed, with more regard to alliteration than to accuracy, "Valetudinarian Vice-Royalty." The Governor's manner, too, had not made a favourable impression. It was considered too stiff and formal; and people said that if he wanted to be popular he would have to learn the difference between a Crown colony and one with its own House of Representatives, and free and independent constitution. The aide-de-camp was aware of the dissatisfaction, and spoke to Lord Arthur in the hope that he might be able to say a word to the Governor, which would produce at least a show of geniality. But Lord Arthur was not disturbed, as was the aide-de-camp. Sir John Randal, he said, being a young man and a professional Governor, popularity had been his game, whereas Colonel Burnside was an old man who didn't care a hang about popularity, and meant to retire on his pension as soon as his term was over. Somehow, this view of things got into the papers too, and Leichardt's Land was indignant at having been made the means of securing a retiring pension. On the whole, things, socially speaking, were not promising, and the aide-de-camp placed his whole hope on Lady Arthur.

She did not disappoint him. She, too, had taken pains in her own way to get information, and knew almost as well as the aide-de-camp to whom she ought to be gracious. Consequently, she had a pretty word or two for the Ministers' wives, and

the persons who it behooved her to honour. She received in the large hall, which at the smaller dances was used as a ballroom, and which, with the aid of Captain Textor, the aide-de-camp, who had a talent for decoration, the curator of the Botanical Gardens, and her own maid, she caused to look very different from what it had done in Lady Randal's time. The former Governor's wife, having been accustomed to the stiff magnificence of Italian palaces, had never imbibed the modern taste in arrangement. Lady Arthur, on the contrary, had been obliged in her little London house to make up for lack of costly furniture by a skilful disposition of palms and draperies. Thus, her Rhodian and Cretan embroideries were something new in Leichardt's Town, and gave food for conversation.

"I hope you won't think I have been making too many innovations," said Lady Arthur sweetly to Mrs. Latham, who was a fat, good-natured-looking lady with prematurely gray hair turned back from her unwrinkled forehead. "I understand that Lady Randal didn't use the hall as a sitting-room, but the Governor thinks it the coolest part of the house; and as he is accustomed to big airy rooms, we spend a good deal of our time in it, and I have tried to make it home-like."

She smiled up at Colonel Burnside, who stood beside her, and to whom she gave the initiative as to the people he ought to talk to. He could not

help being stiff, but his manner had an old-fashioned courtesy, which was attractive to women, and Mrs. Latham found herself chatting with the Governor more unrestrainedly than her husband's description had led her to suppose was possible. She was very shy, but perfectly unaffected, and Mr. Latham owed much of his success to her tact and good-humour. Two of the other Ministers' wives were vulgar, and a third was commonplace, and Lady Arthur began to think that the political dinners would be trying affairs. But she was bound to admit that there were some extremely charming women among the ladies of Leichardt's Town. Mrs. Degraves, for instance, wife of the President of the Council—lately Acting Governor—looked as if she had been packed up in Paris and sent out in silver paper, her bonnet was so pretty and her flowered silk so well made. As a matter of fact, she and her daughter—the Miss Degraves to whom Lady Randal had been so anxious to marry Mr. Van Vechten—got out a box every half-year from a fashionable London dressmaker. Mrs. Degraves had a sprightly way of talking. She was a free-thinker, and went in for being intellectual. She had a faded, distinguished face, and carried her years well. Miss Degraves was tall and dark, and certainly handsome.

"This is quite delightful," said Mrs. Degraves, nodding round at the palms and embroideries. "I can see, Lady Arthur, that you are going to teach

us how to be artistic; I assure you we want a few lessons badly."

Lady Arthur said that it had not struck her that the services of an art apostle were needed in Leichardt's Town.

"Ah, but you haven't been into any of our houses as yet; and I don't suppose you'll ever have great opportunities of judging, unless it is on Ubi Downs. The Government House people always stay with our big squatters up there; but they don't visit among us ordinary Leichardtstonians, except on very state occasions."

Mrs. Degraves laughed, knowing that she herself was not to be included among the ordinary Leichardtstonians, and being secure in the consciousness that her own pretty drawing-room was above criticism.

Lady Arthur turned to greet Mr. Van Vechten, whom she recognised instantly. He was quiet and impressive as usual, and was dressed more correctly than many of the gentlemen present; but he looked, notwithstanding, slightly out of place in a fashionable gathering, and seemed a little nervous—if, indeed, the word "nervous" could be applied to one so composed—for his eyes roved restlessly about, and every now and then glanced quickly towards the door.

"Mrs. Perryman, Mr. James Goodeve, Miss Nùlma Goodeve:" so the butler announced, and Caspar Van Vechten's eyes ceased from roving.

Mrs. Perryman's frilled scarf and high bonnet obscured Nùlma's slight form; but she passed on after a formal greeting by Lady Arthur, who knew that she was only the wife of a Civil servant. Then somehow a rift in the crowd brought the young girl into almost startling prominence. She stood quite still, while Lady Arthur said something nice to her father, and watched Margot's face with a grave and intensely eager interest. It never occurred to Nùlma to hide anything she was feeling, and she was overpoweringly interested in Lady Arthur. The foreign-looking woman, with her narrow face, her thin nose, her peculiar smile, the blinking gaze she gave out of her dark, brilliant eyes, and her crinkly hair parted above her low forehead—the whole personality, in short, affected Nùlma as no other in her life had ever affected her. She was not quite sure whether she was attracted or repelled, but of the fascination Lady Arthur exercised there could be no doubt. Nùlma had never seen anyone the least like her. How could people say that she resembled Lady Randal? There had been nothing subtle and serpentine about Lady Randal. Nùlma could see no point of similarity, except that both women were dark and had the foreign trick of gesture. To Nùlma, every word that Lady Arthur spoke seemed like a caress; but might it not be a dangerous caress, like that which a cat may give the mouse with which she is playing before dealing it the death-blow? Lady Arthur's eyes

rested full on Nùlma's face. The two women gazed at each other, and Lady Arthur paused in the sentence she was addressing Mr. Goodeve. It had been in relation to the show, and the Governor's regret at his inability to attend it. She had been explaining to Mr. Goodeve that the Governor—who was now in conversation with Mrs. Degraves—was not ill at all in reality, but only a little enfeebled temporarily by the effects of an African fever which had again attacked him in the rainy heat off Ceylon. "But your climate is so—" she was saying, and stopped.

"Mr. Goodeve," she added, "I want to know your daughter. I haven't said, 'How do you do?' to her yet. Ah, how pretty she is!"—this in a rapid undertone.

"It is Nùlma's first appearance in society, Lady Arthur," said James Goodeve, reddening with pleasure at the sensation his daughter had created. "She is to come out at your Birthday ball."

"So I have heard already," said Lady Arthur, giving Nùlma her hand, and smiling sweetly at the girl. "Do you know, Miss Goodeve, yours was almost the first lady's name which interested me on my arrival in Leichardt's Land. I happened to overhear a conversation about you on the deck of the tender—I couldn't help hearing it; it wasn't anything private, I assure you, and it was between your father and Mr. Latham and another gentle-

man, whom I afterwards found to be Mr. Van Vechten."

"Ah, then," said Nùlma, "it was certain to be something nice, for not one of them would say an ill word of me."

"You are fortunate to be so absolutely convinced of the single-hearted devotion of three men. But, of course, one of them is your father."

"And Mr. Latham has known me ever since I was a baby," said Nùlma; "and the other is—Mr. Van Vechten."

She had spoken quite innocently, but a sudden blush suffused her face as she remembered the ride and the bargain. Lady Arthur gave her little low laugh.

"I am perfectly ready to believe in Mr. Van Vechten's devotion," she said. "He was here a moment ago. Now, Miss Nùlma, you must have some tea, and I shall see that you are well taken care of at the Birthday ball. But tell me—your name struck me so. How did you come by it? It sounds Eastern. I have never heard it before."

Nùlma glanced at her father, whose bluff, burly face had a pained expression. He turned abruptly away. Lady Arthur perceived that she had been indiscreet.

"I see," she murmured. "Never mind. Perhaps it was your mother's name."

"No; it was not my mother's name," answered Nùlma. "But my mother gave it to me when

she was dying. It is a native word. It means a snake."

"It is very pretty, but I don't think it suits you—the meaning of it, at least. I shouldn't fancy that you had any of the serpent's guile, my dear. Well, you must have some tea, and I will find someone nice to take care of you."

She glanced over the heads of the little crowd surrounding her, who happened to be mostly women; and Nùlma saw how tall she was. At that moment the butler announced some other names. Lady Arthur made an imperious little motion with her head to a gentleman behind. He stepped forward.

"Come," she said; "I want to present you to the most charming young lady in the world, whose first appearance it is in society, her father says, and who is coming out at the Birthday ball. Take her to have some tea, and show her how I have altered the drawing-rooms. Miss Nùlma Goodeve, let me introduce your new Chief Justice, Mr. Kenward."

Kenward had noticed Nùlma directly she came in, and had been greatly struck by her beautiful face and the shy, half-wild way in which she carried herself. He felt inexpressibly attracted towards her. The look Lady Arthur gave him over her shoulder annoyed him, however. It seemed to say: "I have introduced you to your child of Nature. Don't abuse my trust."

He held out his arm to Nùlma, but she did

not take it, not being accustomed to the offering of men's arms except for a dance. She walked beside him very straight and erect, her stag-like head, in its pretty white straw hat, which, tilted as the fashion was, allowed the coils of her yellowish-brown hair to show plainly, topping the heads of most of the other women. He thought she was like a young gum-sapling, she was so straight and so slender and tall.

"The tea is in the veranda," he said, "and we will come back to the drawing-room afterwards."

"I don't want any tea, thank you," said Nùlma. "I had some with Luce Perryman at Wirrib."

He wondered who Luce Perryman might be and where Wirrib was. The word came from her lips with the prettiest whirr.

"I'm glad to find that Leichardt's Land is not following the bad practice of some of her sister colonies, and changing the native names into Cockney ones," he observed.

"I don't know where Cockney is," said Nùlma. "But I think we are getting nearly as bad as the others. We have called our long streets after the English history queens, and the cross ones after the kings; and they might just as well have had pretty Australian names."

"Such as——?"

"Oh, Wirrib, Coryea, or Yarrabin, or ever so many others. I'd have chosen the name of some native beast or bird, so that in ages to come, when

the blacks are all dead and done for, their language would remain."

"I quite agree with you, and it is a pretty, original notion. Tell me, what do the words mean?"

"Wirrib means parrot, and Coryea is paddy-melon, and Yarrabin is the white gum."

"You seem to know a great deal about the Blacks' language, Miss Goodeve?"

"I used to talk it quite well when I was a little thing out West," answered Nùlma. "But that isn't the Western dialect," she added. "I learned those names from a half-caste woman daddy took from the camp down South and brought up with him."

They had reached the veranda, where a long table was spread with fruit, ices, and tea and coffee.

"Won't you try some red guavas and cream?" said Kenward. "They're the Australian substitute, aren't they, for our strawberry squash?"

"You shouldn't say 'our,'" said Nùlma gravely. "You should forget now that you are English, and make yourself Australian. A Leichardt's Land Chief Justice ought to be Australian, you know. Mr. Latham and the Ministers were rather cross when you were appointed."

"Were they indeed?" said Kenward, handing her the plate of iced guavas and cream, of which Nùlma showed a proper appreciation. "Please tell me why."

"They said it was keeping the colony in lead-

ing-strings," replied Nùlma, "and treating us as if we needed a schoolmaster."

" You are very young still," said Kenward— " the colony, I mean. I had not intended to be personal. I have no doubt the Home Government took that fact into consideration. Don't you think that perhaps in some ways you do want a schoolmaster?"

" I do, I know," answered Nùlma, with perfect frankness, " or a schoolmistress. But, then, daddy never would send me to school; and I did always have such stupid governesses. It's not surprising that I am so badly educated."

" Are you badly educated?" asked Kenward, amused. " I should say that you were very well educated. I don't suppose that any of the Oxford professors could talk Blacks' language."

" Oh, *that!*" she exclaimed, with an accent of contempt. " But I make horrible mistakes in spelling, and I never can recollect a date. Still, Mr. Kenward, it doesn't follow that, because I want a schoolmaster, the other Leichardtstonians want one, too. But I am sure they will like you very much when they know you," she added graciously—" better, perhaps, than one of themselves, for they would have been jealous of him before long."

She had hardly looked at Kenward until now. She had rattled on, as she had been in the habit of doing with Van Vechten or Mr. Latham, or any of the other men she knew intimately, of whom,

indeed, the number was small; and perhaps this was the reason of her perfect unconsciousness. But now, as she glanced up at Kenward's dark face, so impressive in its look of power and breeding, and in the sensitive curves of his fine mouth and chin, and as she noticed certain unconsidered trifles about him, which stamped him as different from the other men she knew—the cut of his clothes, the colour of his tie, the unobtrusive watch-chain and links and centre stud, which were so plain, but had a certain distinctiveness and richness—a feeling new to Nùlma came over her, something of the same feeling that she had about Lady Arthur, only that in this there was nothing of repulsion mingled with the vague fascination.

"Shall we go and look at the drawing-room?" asked Kenward. "I wonder which you will like the best. Lady Arthur's or Lady Randal's arrangement."

"I shall not know, for I have never been in the house before," answered Nùlma.

"Really! Oh yes, I remember that Lady Arthur said this was your first entrance into society."

He laughed slightly. This kind of social performance seemed to him such a marionette play. There was no tinge of sarcasm in the laugh, and if there had been, she was too deeply impressed with the importance of her entrance into society to notice it.

"I am to come out at the May ball," she announced gravely. "Oh, did Lady Arthur do all this?"

She uttered the exclamation as they paused in the larger reception-room, which was prettily shaped, with two deep-set bow-windows, their embrasures made to seem deeper by means of screens put endways, over which Lady Arthur had hung some of her famous embroideries. The curator had supplied well-grown palms in green tubs, and their broad fronds threw shadows over the cosy corners. The chairs and couches had been pulled out from their former stiff positions, and there was the usual litter of small tables, flowers, and miscellaneous properties such as the modern woman likes to strew about her—and, for those days, Lady Arthur was very modern. The room was just a tasteful, slightly-eccentric English drawing-room, but to Nùlma it seemed a scene of luxury and picturesque extravagance unparalleled.

"Oh yes, it must be Lady Arthur's doing," replied Kenward, "though I expect Textor—he is the aide, you know—had a hand in it. Textor has a genius for fixing up plants and dinner-tables and draperies. No doubt you'll see something astonishing in that way at the May ball."

"I think Lady Arthur must be very clever," said Nùlma. "I should never have thought of sticking up needlework like that. Is it what people do in England? I shall tell Mrs. Perryman; she

does such a lot of woolwork, and never knows how to fix it."

Kenward laughed again, and wondered whether Lady Arthur would be amused at the child of Nature's comparison of her wonderful old embroideries with Mrs. Perryman's woolwork. On second thoughts, however, he decided not to tell her of it. The girl added reflectively, as though she had been weighing the matter:

"Mrs. Perryman's work wouldn't look at all like that, though. It's hideous—like herself. Stodgy, you know."

"Well," said Kenward, "I must say that Mrs. Perryman's personality—she is the lady with roses in her bonnet—doesn't suggest the graceful Arab girls who made that embroidery. Arab girls have all to embroider a long strip before they can be married. Did you know?"

"No; I don't know anything about Arab girls. Have you been in the East?" she asked eagerly.

"Oh, only along the beaten track. I've wintered in Egypt and Algeria."

Nùlma seemed to be again reflecting upon the embroidery and upon the difference between Mrs. Perryman and graceful Arab maidens.

"I should think they must have been thinking happy thoughts," she said. "People must put a good deal of themselves into their work, shouldn't you say?"

"I'm sure they do." Kenward remembered a fanciful arabesque pattern upon which Lady Arthur had occupied herself during the voyage, and about which he had teased her, as representing her varying moods. "I wonder what your work would be like!" he exclaimed.

"Oh, I never do any. But if I did, it wouldn't be Mrs. Perryman's kind. I'd get Bush flowers and twist them into patterns of wreaths or something—round boomerangs and nulla-nullas, so as to remind one of romantic savage things. I'd group them to make one fancy each flower was a thought, and each thought part of a song."

"And your song? A native woman's love-song, I conclude."

Nùlma laughed.

"Who would ever dream of a blackgin singing a love-song? Poor things! they're never given the chance. If a black fellow takes a fancy to a girl, he just throws a spear into the camp where she is, and if she is not sold to anyone else he pays for her and gets her. There's nothing very romantic about that. My song would be a song of the Bush, that's all."

"A song of the woods and streams; of whispering she-oaks and rustling gums; a song of the cries of Bush birds, and of the pure thoughts of Nature-spirits. It should be sweet, wild, joyous, but with a note of melancholy in it. I like the notion of your song, Miss Nùlma, and I hope that some day you

will work that piece of embroidery and give me the interpretation thereof."

Nùlma's eyes met his in a fearless, half-doubting gaze; then drooped, reassured. She had fancied uneasily for a moment that he might be laughing at her. He in his turn was startled by the brilliancy of those brown eyes, with the yellow glints in them which harmonized with her chestnut hair, and with the hue of her soft warm cheeks. Her skin in its sun-kissed bloom made him think of a ripe apricot. A fantastic idea seized him that he would like to see her dressed in certain shades of russet and yellow-green, to carry out the simile. He asked absently:

"Do you ever wear yellow and green?"

"Yellow and green?" she repeated. "No; why?"

"I beg a hundred pardons, but it occurred to me that I should like to make a study of you in those colours. That's all."

"A study of me?" she said, puzzled. "What sort of a study?"

"A study in oils. I should like to paint you."

"Are you a painter?" she questioned with awed interest.

"I dabble a bit. Do you think it's an odd foible for a Chief Justice? Please don't respect me the less, or give me away, just yet, to the Leichardt-stonians."

"I wasn't thinking of that—at least, of its being

an odd foible." She did not know what he meant exactly by being "given away"; his modern jargon was unfamiliar to her. "But, oh! I love pictures."

"Do you? I thought you would care for art, somehow."

"Oh! How could I know anything about art? We haven't any out here. That's what Luce tells me Mrs. Degraves is always saying."

"Where do you learn, then, to love pictures?"

"They had an exhibition here, you know, last year; and the galleries of Melbourne and Sydney and some of the rich people down there, sent up paintings. They were by the great artists in England, and I used to go ever so often to look at them."

"Perhaps you would care to look at one or two little things I brought out with me," he said. "They are not by great artists. I can't afford to buy Millais and Tadema, and the rest of them. But I shall be surprised if the fellows who painted mine haven't a big name some day. Miss Goodeve, I shall feel very much honoured if you will come some time with your father or Mrs. Perryman and see my diggings and the pictures."

"I should like very much to come," answered Nühma frankly. "I suppose that daddy will let me, now that I have come out. He won't let me walk in Victoria Street, you know, like other girls."

"I think your father is perfectly right."

"And he never would let me know anyone—except the Perrymans and Mr. Van Vechten."

"Mr. Van Vechten must feel himself to be a very favoured person," began the Chief Justice, when the gentleman in question came up to where the two were standing. He shook hands with Mr. Kenward, whose acquaintance he had made on the Government tender.

"I hear you talking about me," he said; "and you are quite right. I do feel myself greatly favoured in being permitted to have the honour of occasionally escorting Miss Goodeve. Nùlma," he added, "your father asked me to bring you to him. He's over there, talking to Mrs. Degraves, and he would like you to be introduced to her."

Kenward bowed and withdrew. Nùlma walked away beside Van Vechten.

"I wish you hadn't interrupted us just now," she said, a little pettishly. "I was having a beautiful talk."

"Then, I am sorry to have to put a stop to it," replied Van Vechten stiffly; and his still face looked more than ever as if it were cut in ivory.

"Don't be cross with me, Uncle Van. You know what I mean."

"I don't think I do quite, Nùlma. Your talk had lasted a long time; and it would really be a nice thing for you to know Mrs. Degraves; she might take you about sometimes, instead of Mrs. Perryman."

"I didn't mean that," cried Nùlma, repentant. "Of course, it was quite budgery of you to come bothering about me. Still, I did have a beautiful talk."

"What was it all about?"

"Heaps of things. Pictures, and needlework, and love-songs."

"Love-songs?"

"Oh, well, I said there *couldn't* be a blackgin's love-song—Nature-songs. And he said he'd like to paint me."

"Oh, did he indeed?"

"You think a Chief Justice oughtn't to paint pictures. It doesn't seem quite to go with trying people and sentencing them. Would he ever have to sentence them to death?"

"Yes; if the jury had found them guilty of murder, or anything of that sort."

Nùlma shuddered. That view of Kenward's vocation had not before struck her.

"Horrible! How could he do it? One forgets he is the Chief Justice——"

She paused. They had made the length of the big room, and were in the smaller one off it, where Mr. Goodeve was standing in embarrassed conversation with Mrs. Degraves. He looked relieved when Nùlma appeared and the introduction was effected. Mrs. Degraves had never hitherto taken any notice of the Minister of Mines, but when she saw the reception Lady Arthur gave to Nùlma,

observed that the Chief Justice had been paying her a good deal of attention, and reflected that she would probably in time marry Mr. Van Vechten, she decided that it would be a kindly thing to give countenance to the young girl, who was so pretty and who had no mother.

CHAPTER VI.

VAN VECHTEN'S LOVE.

IF Caspar Van Vechten had been compelled to state truthfully why he was so much in love with the child Nùlma, he would have found it difficult to frame a series of logical reasons. When had he begun to love her? It appeared to him that he had loved her from the first moment he had seen her, a tall, sapling-like girl in short frocks, whom he had unexpectedly come upon as she stood wrathfully facing her governess, her brown eyes flashing, her thin shoulders held back, and her burnt-looking hair standing out in separate threads, as if it were full of electricity. The governess had done something to incur the girl's displeasure; Mr. Van Vechten never quite knew what, but gleaned that it was of a mean and underhand nature, meanness and underhandedness being sins held by Nùlma in special reprobation. He sympathized with the child, for he had conceived an antipathy to the governess—or perhaps the antipathy came after Nùlma's outburst. Anyhow, he

pleaded to Nùlma's father, when Mr. Goodeve, with an heroic effort at discipline, condemned his daughter to the punishment of not going for a ride during the next four weeks. Nùlma had stormed and wept, and had forced Mr. Van Vechten to own that she had a very hot temper; and later, when he watched the ingenious methods by which she contrived to revenge herself upon the offending governess, and, finally, to compass her dismissal, he realized that there was in her temper a considerable spice of vindictiveness, as well as that she had a stubborn will which might under certain conditions make her a difficult person to manage.

Yet he loved Nùlma all the same; and he loved her more and more the oftener he saw her. By-and-by, when she found out that he had begged her off, and got her sentence commuted to two weeks' abstention from horseback instead of four, her impulsive gratitude and pretty manner of showing it convinced him that, if she was bad-tempered and vindictive, she was very warm-hearted, and had a power of fascination that would make her, as far as men were concerned, a dangerous young woman. She was then about fifteen, and from that time she had seemed to recognise in him a friend, or, rather, as she phrased it, "someone of the uncle sort." So it came about that she got into the way of calling him Uncle Van, which puzzled people who did not know that there was no relationship whatever

between them, and that the title was only a recognition of the friendly interest he took in her, and a mark of respect to one so many years older than herself.

Van Vechten had an investment which brought him into rather close business connectionship with James Goodeve; and thus he was often at the Bunyas, and was one of the very few men whom Goodeve admitted into his home. The ostensible bond of union between the men was the Goodeve Consolation Company; the real one was Nühma. Nühma was the ruling motive of both these men's lives, though by Van Vechten this was only tacitly admitted. Goodeve adored his daughter, the survivor of a tragedy which had darkened the ex-carrier's life; and Van Vechten, by the time of Nühma's sixteenth birthday, had made up his mind that she, and no other woman, should be his wife. He had told Lady Randal so, under the pressure of certain proposals of the Governor's wife; and Lady Randal had told her friend, Caroline Degraves, who in her turn had informed her mother, the President's lady.

So it became pretty generally known in Leichardt's Town that Nühma Goodeve, the girl who was kept so rigorously in the background, and never allowed by her father to be seen in Victoria Street without a gauze veil, was likely to carry off the most eligible bachelor of Leichardt's Land. To be sure, there were other eligible bachelors, and

notably now the Chief Justice; but Van Vechten had the reputation of being very rich, and he had a fine house, and had been brought into prominence by Lady Randal's notice; whereas the Chief Justice was known to have no fortune to speak of beyond his salary, and, moreover, it was already whispered that he was devoted to Lady Arthur Keefe—in due honour, be it understood, for, with all their love of gossip, the Leichardtstonians were an unsophisticated community, and not given to evil interpretations of the conduct of their betters.

Caspar Van Vechten had not reached the age of fifty without having had a romance. Few unmarried men of those years are bachelors unless there is a woman for the reason. There had been a woman in Van Vechten's life, and the woman had been his divorced wife. Thus, when he became known in Leichardt's Town, he was not, strictly speaking, a bachelor, though the world believed him so, and knew nothing of a certain marriage that had taken place over twenty years before in the State of New York, and had been there dissolved.

It was that divorce which had brought Van Vechten to Australia, and which had been the cause of his aloofness from society. He was a man with decided views upon the sanctity of the marriage bond, and though he had divorced his wife, and had been glad that her position should be legiti-

mized, he did not hold the same law of conduct good for himself, and would have thought it wrong to marry again while the woman who had been his wife was alive. This placed him in a false situation. Not choosing to take society into his confidence, he was doing society an injustice, and laying himself open to the chance of having any attention he might pay to an unmarried woman misconstrued. He therefore avoided women, and made himself happy among his men friends in the house he had built, with his horses and his garden for his chief interest. Had he been an intellectual or artistic person, he would have collected books and pictures, and surrounded himself with brie-à-brac; but he was not intellectual, and he knew nothing about art. He had worked too hard at making money, and he had never been brought into contact with artistic people. As he grew richer, he interested himself in an unostentatious sort of benevolence, which had been the beginning of his short intimacy with Lady Randal. Perhaps he would not have permitted this intimacy had he not received the news a little time after his first meeting with Nùlma that his divorced wife was dead.

Nùlma was, as may be supposed, the very antithesis of the woman he had first loved. He told himself that he knew her in and in, and that there was not one speck of deceit or disloyalty in her nature. His wife had deceived him from the very first, and had been grossly disloyal. He told him-

self that he would never trust his happiness a second time to any woman old enough to know her world, or who had been educated after the fashion of ordinary girls. Nùlma's frank avowals of her ignorance were always to him so much in her of added charm. He did not want a clever wife. He wanted only Nùlma, the beautiful, frank, wilful, ignorant child, whom he loved because she was—Nùlma.

A day or two after the Government House reception, Nùlma was startled at seeing an orderly ride round to the front-door, and still more when two large square envelopes in thick cream-laid paper, with the red official stamp on the flap, were put into her hands.

"For me?" she cried. "It must be you, daddy; and it's your invitation to the Ministers' dinner and the Birthday ball." But, as she turned over the envelopes, her own name met her on each. "'Miss Goodeve, The Bunyas,'" she read aloud.

"You'd better open them, Lulu," said Mr. Goodeve. "You're a come-out young lady now, remember."

"And invitations are always addressed to the lady," put in Mr. Van Vecliten, who was sitting with them in the veranda. It was Saturday afternoon, and he had a habit of coming out on a Saturday, to take Nùlma for a ride, or to talk business and politics with the Minister of Mines, or merely to lounge about the veranda and garden, and stay

afterwards to dinner. "I think I know what it is," he added. "I found mine at home when I looked in on my way out."

"There are two," said Nùlma, as she reverently disclosed two oblong bits of pasteboard, which conveyed the information that the Governor requested the honour of Mr. and Miss Goodeve's company, in the first place, to a ball in celebration of her Majesty's birthday on that day month, and, in the second, to dinner on a much earlier date.

"I never was at a dinner-party in my life," said Nùlma. "I don't know how to behave, or what to eat, or whether to use my fork or spoon—or anything. I couldn't go, daddy. I really couldn't; you'd be ashamed of me."

"I'm bound to be that, anyhow, at the ball—ain't I, Lulu?" James Goodeve gave his gruff, tender laugh as he looked at his daughter, his red eyes dilating with pride and pleasure. He hated parties, and nothing short of Ministerial obligations would have persuaded him to dine at Government House alone; but that Nùlma should be asked was a tribute that gratified him immensely.

"Oh, well, at any rate, I *can* dance," said Nùlma frankly.

"And you can eat, I suppose?"

"Not properly. Besides, a ball is a very different thing from going into a dinner-party with a stranger."

"Perhaps he won't be a stranger," put in Mr.

Van Vechten. "I'm asked, too, Nùlma; and it's just possible they may send you in to dinner with me."

"That would be letting me off easier, Uncle Van," answered Nùlma, not enthusiastically; "but it would be pretty much the same, wouldn't it, as if you were having dinner with us at home here, except that there'd be Lady Arthur and the others to look at, and somebody else on the other side of me? I don't mind so much who that is as long as it isn't Victor Degraves; I've got a down on Victor," added Nùlma in Australian vernacular.

"What for, Lulu? He's a very fine young man, and thinks no small-beer of himself, I can tell you," said Mr. Goodeve.

Nùlma pursed up her lips and shook her head.

"He's a mean-spirited thing!" she said; and Van Vechten guessed that Victor Degraves had somehow been implicated in the affair of the orange-peel. Perhaps had egged on Malcolm Derrett, and had thus provoked Nùlma's scorn.

The dinner-party took place ten days later. There had been a good deal of discussion at the Bunyas and at Wirrib on the subject of Nùlma's dress, as well as on that of her behaviour. Mrs. Perrymen, on hearing that they were to have carte-blanche at the dressmaker's, had inclined to something florid and expensive. She had bemoaned the rigorous necessity for white, but wished that the material, at least, might be rich, and the orna-

mentation profuse, with just a touch of colour—blue forget-me-nots or pink roses, in artificial blossoms, dotted about it. Luckily, Mr. Van Vechten heard the suggestion, and he made his views known to Nühma's father, who decreed that his girl was to be in pure white, with no jangles nor spangles nor ornamentation whatsoever. Mr. Goodeve had instinctively a refined taste in the matter of women's appearance and behaviour, which was not so much to be wondered at, seeing that his dead wife had been brought up in a great house in England, and had filled the situation of lady's-maid to one of the daughters of the house. She had been twenty-five when she married James Goodeve, the carrier, and emigrated to Australia, and she had been a dainty, pleasant-spoken young woman, educated above her station, and a favourite with her mistress, who had made something of a companion of her. Mr. Good-eve, inspired by Van Vechten, was beginning to have doubts as to Mrs. Perryman's fitness for the office of Nühma's chaperon, and was casting about in his mind whether Mrs. Degraves might not be persuaded to undertake the duty, or, on occasions, Mrs. Latham. But Mrs. Latham had religious scruples about certain forms of gaiety, and could not be always relied upon. Mrs. Degraves, however, in spite of her artistic tendencies, was an object of social consideration, and held a high place in Leichardt's Town.

Mrs. Perryman was faintly aggrieved at her taste

being set aside, and more unreasonably hurt because she had not been asked to the dinner. It would have been but natural, she declared, though Mr. Perryman was only a head of department, seeing that she had accompanied Nùlma to the reception, and Lady Arthur might thus have known that she was to be considered as having the girl more or less under her charge.

"I don't suppose that Lady Arthur has much to do with it," said poor Luce Perryman from her sofa. Luce was a little thing with bright yellow hair, blue eyes, and a babyish freckled face. She was considered pretty, and was a nice, unaffected creature, sincerely anxious that Nùlma should look her best, and have a good time, even though she, Luce, might not share it. "The aide-de-camp keeps a list," she went on, "and puts the names down from the visiting-book, and settles it all—at least, that was how it used to be in the Randals' time. Victor Degraves told me so, and the Acting Governor's son ought to know."

"That may be for the balls and big dinners," said Mrs. Perryman; "but a dinner-party with only a fortnight's notice—and asking a young girl not even properly come out! That means something particular; you may be sure the aide-de-camp has had nothing to do with it."

"Mr. Goodeve is a Minister, you know, mamma; and I suppose Nùlma is asked because she has no mother to go instead of her."

"Ministers take their regular turns at the big dinners. As if you should know more about it than your mother, Luce! Do stop arguing. And about your dress, Nùlma. I'm sorry your father and Mr. Van Vechten don't approve of what I suggested; and I can't say that I think Mr. Van Vechten has any right to interfere—*now*, at any rate. But I'll do as your father wishes, and go with you to Miss Orr's. You are a lucky girl; and I wonder when Luce will be told that she may get a dress made at Miss Orr's and the bill paid without a grumble? Not till it comes to being her wedding-gown, and she's likely to wait a good while for that—lying here, with Mr. Clayton charging a guinea each for two visits a week."

Luce began to cry, and to moan that it wasn't her fault that she had hurt her back and cost so much in doctor's fees, and Nùlma got indignant.

"Oh, Mrs. Perryman, it is too bad for you to go and make things harder for poor Luce! Perhaps when Dr. Clayton sends in his bill he'll lump the visits, and they won't be a guinea each, after all; and it's bad enough for Luce to see me going to parties and getting dresses and things when we were to have come out together, without grinding it into her worse, though I'm sure she needn't be sorry about the dinner," Nùlma went on. "You're quite certain there's nothing else, Mrs. Perryman? I'm to mind and eat the fish with my fork and a

bit of bread"—in those days fish-knives had not reached Leichardt's Land—"and I'm not to use a knife to the oyster patties; and I'm to be sure and not take cheese. Don't ladies *ever* eat cheese at dinner-parties, Mrs. Perryman? Luckily, I don't like it; but it must be hard on you, for you do enjoy your cheese and porter when you're at home."

"In my young days," said Mrs. Perryman—"and I was accustomed to lead a visiting life in England, Nùlma—it would have been considered as indelicate for a young lady to eat cheese in a low dress as to ride in a hansom-cab. Manners may have changed, and to look at Lady Arthur one would suppose they had; but it's safer to keep to the old rules."

"Well, I think I shall remember all that," said Nùlma. "And when we get to the door, I'm to hang back and let all the married ladies go first. I should have done that, anyhow."

"And if there's asparagus, Nùlma," continued Mrs. Perryman, in conscientious exhortation, "you'd better let it pass, though it's a delicious vegetable. Asparagus is awkward to manage with one's fork; and though I *have* seen ladies lift it up by the stalk, I cannot think that looks elegant, and there's always a risk of spilling the butter on one's dress."

Nùlma nodded.

"I shall say 'No, thank you,' when the asparagus comes round."

"And you'll notice everything, Nühma," said poor Luce, "so that you can describe it to me exactly afterwards."

Nühma nodded again.

"And if you can get hold of a menu-card, you'll bring it back for me?" said Mrs. Perryman.

"Yes—yes. And one thing I do promise you, Luce: I *shall* get hold of some of the sweeties or dried fruits if there are any, and you shall have your share of the dinner to eat while I'm telling you all about it. You won't miss anything, for I'll remember just how everyone is dressed, and how the table is fixed, and all that Lady Arthur says. I do wish you could have seen Lady Arthur."

"She's lovely, isn't she, Lulu?"

"Lovely isn't the word. I can't describe her any way; only she seems to have come out of a picture. I'm sure I have seen one like her. Yes; I know. Do you remember Henrietta Maria in Miss Strickland's '*Lives*'? Well, she has a long, thin nose, and a sad, queer look in her eyes, like Henrietta Maria."

"I'm sure I can't see that Henrietta Maria was so very pretty," objected Luce.

"Not *pretty*—pretty, that is, like you, Luce, or me, or Miss Degraves; but with a story in her face. That's better than being pretty. Lady Arthur has a story in her face."

"Well, for my part," observed Mrs. Perryman, with asperity—she had not taken to Lady Arthur,

who she thought had slighted her—"I shouldn't care for a daughter of mine to read that kind of story. Lady Arthur's story is one of flirtations and fast goings-on, I feel pretty sure; and I should say, from all I hear, that the new Chief Justice made up a long chapter of it."

CHAPTER VII.

NÜLMA'S FIRST DINNER-PARTY.

VAN VECHTEN's hopes and half-prophecy were not realized, for Nühma was given to the aide-de-camp to take in to dinner, and he, to his annoyance, was entrusted with Miss Degraves.

Caroline Degraves was a young lady who was usually spoken of as a "pretty girl," though the epithet was hardly appropriate, either to her style of good looks or to her years. Though certainly a "girl" in the general sense, in Australia, where women age rapidly, she would almost have been classed as an old maid had she not managed to retain an extremely youthful appearance, and, though nearly thirty, did not look more than twenty. This was due, perhaps, to a knack she had of putting on her clothes effectively, so that, as Mrs. Perryman remarked with approbation, "she always looked stylish." She was tall and dark, with very brilliant eyes, abundant hair, which she dressed fashionably, clear-cut, determined features, and a sweet and especially distinct enunciation, without

a trace of the Australian drawl. As a matter of fact, she was not a genuine Australian, having come out to Sydney when she was six years old.

From the prominent position her father occupied, she held her head high, and none of the offers she had so far received had found favour in her sight. These had been mostly from squatters, more or less well-to-do, but not wealthy enough to assure her against the roughnesses of Bush life. She had a horror of being buried in the Bush, and had frankly told her last suitor that she did not intend her happiness to be dependent upon the rise and fall of the wool market or a visitation of pleuro-pneumonia. The last suitor was a squatter from the Northern district, who was also a member of the Legislative Assembly. His name was Justin Blaize, and he presented a great contrast to Miss Degraves, being small, and red, and a little rough in his manners. But he was of good family, which counted for a great deal in the Degraves' eyes; and, moreover, he was limply pertinacious, and would not take "No" for an answer, having for the last three years renewed his addresses regularly each session. He, too, was at the Government House dinner, by the perversity of fate seated at Nülda's other side, and opposite the object of his affections. This was not the fault of Captain Textor, the aide-de-camp, who had made himself duly acquainted with the situation, and would have liked to make everybody happy. But Lady Arthur had had her

voice in the arrangement of the guests, and had insisted that they should be thus disposed, partly out of a whimsical contrariety, partly because she wanted the Chief Justice beside herself, and a different sorting did not well admit of this, and partly because, as she observed, she wanted to begin her deal with a fresh shuffle of the cards.

Lady Arthur had Mr. Degraves on her right and the Chief Justice on her left hand. To him had been awarded the wife of a prominent member, the leader of the Opposition. Politics were represented only by this gentleman, Mr. Blaize, and the Minister of Mines, and the party was considered to be quite unofficial. Mrs. Degraves sat next the Governor, the Opposition lady at his other side, and the rest in due order.

Nühma was not happy. A big plant of maidenhair intervened between her and Van Vechten, upon whom she had counted to tell her whether she was behaving properly. She had not realized till then what a stay and support he was in all her difficulties, and reflected vaguely amid the perplexities occasioned by her multifarious wine-glasses, forks, and an unintelligible menu, that, on the whole, it might be a nice thing to be safely married to "Uncle Van," and to have secured him as a permanent protector. It was at this moment that, happening to glance towards Lady Arthur, she caught Kenward's gaze fixed upon her, and derived the same warm sense of comfort from it as when Van Vechten did

her a kindness that specially pleased her. No, not the same, for this gave her a thrill of emotion quite different—an emotion, if, indeed, the undefinable feeling could be given so definite a name, hitherto unknown to Nülmia; and she returned the smile, and blushed, while her brown eyes shot a gleam which made her look, he thought, more beautiful than any woman he had ever seen. There was a vividness, a fearless and yet confiding innocence, an extraordinary freshness and purity in this girl, such as he had never in his life beheld in any other young girl. And her colouring—the brown eyes, the apricot bloom, the tawny hair, and those absolutely childish red lips, parting to show the gleam of white teeth—it was unequalled. How he would like to paint her! He glanced sideways at Margot Keefe's long, narrow face, with its set fascinating smile and its indescribable exotic look, her sinuous throat and dazzlingly white and well-formed neck and shoulders, every curve and expression telling of a woman in the early maturity of beauty and experienced charm, and mentally contrasted her with the young girl. But Margot Keefe was still very dear to him, and dearer because for the last week he had seen little of her, and had been harassed and perplexed by certain small difficulties of his new position, which under any other circumstances he would have brought to her, counting upon her sympathy and solace. She, too, had been a little harassed and perplexed by social difficulties,

and she had been tormented by that new guilty consciousness, and by a lately-born terror of her husband. Terror is not too strong a word; she exaggerated each fresh phase of feeling after the manner of sensitive, somewhat morbidly-inclined and neurotic women, so that with her imagination swiftly prefigured the worst possible reality. Lord Arthur had never before presented himself to her under dramatic conditions, and that suppressed passion in him, which had shown itself again the other day, in spite of his half-promise, in another appeal to her wifely tenderness, and in more hints of jealousy that might spur him to an undreamed-of violence, filled her with frightened distrust of everything round her. She suspected a spy in the orderly who had followed them upon the only occasion when she had ridden with the Chief Justice, and in Lord Arthur's most careless question found a desire to entrap her. He had been dull and morose, and here she saw a sign of vengeance brooding. And in the ten days which had elapsed since that last scene, she had got to hate her husband with an intensity that seemed to deepen in proportion as her intercourse with Outram Kenward dwindled into a conventional interchange of civilities, for she had been afraid to see him alone in her own sitting-room. The few times when he had called and she had been talking to him in the drawing-room, Lord Arthur had by accident or design strolled in upon them, and had lingered round, preventing any sort

of unembarrassed conversation. She was in an odd reckless mood, and it was when she noticed how Kenward looked at Nühma, and how Lord Arthur's eyes seemed constantly bent towards her end of the table, that a desperate scheme dawned upon her —a scheme for testing Kenward's fidelity, and for dispelling any suspicions that might lurk in Lord Arthur's mind. To be sure, the scheme involved an exquisite self-torture, but she was in the mood to find a morbid pleasure even in torturing herself. She said in a low voice to Kenward:

"That little girl is quite astonishingly pretty. The painters at home would rave about her colouring. Doesn't it make you want to get out your tubes and brushes and engage her as a model?"

"I am afraid our good friend the Minister of Mines, who objects to her appearing unveiled in Victoria Street, would hardly consent to hire her out at eighteenpence an hour," replied Kenward lightly. "I confess, however, to the temptation; but I must drop all that kind of dilettantism now."

"You'd have been a very good artist if you had had to earn your living that way," she said in a tone of impartial criticism. "I don't see why you should give it up. The last Chief Justice, I learn, occupied his hours of leisure in catching butterflies for a collection which they have put in the museum. I don't see why you shouldn't employ yours in laying the foundation of a Leichardt's Land Art Gallery."

"With your portrait as a pendant to Lady Ran-

dal's, which might be removed from the waiting-room of the Girls' Industrial College."

"No, thank you. I don't mean to follow in Lady Randal's footsteps. My patronage of the Girls' Industrial College will be purely nominal. I shall strike upon a more original plan of philanthropy. But seriously," she went on, "I wish you would make a study of Nùlma Goodeve—for me. You can present the Minister of Mines with the original, and do me a replica."

"I think there would be some difficulties in the way," he answered.

"Oh, I'll manage it for you; we'll ask her here and arrange a studio. A birthday present to the father it should be. I'm going to make friends with the child. Don't you think I shall be improved by companionship with such youthful innocence?"

He looked at her silently, and turned his head away without speaking. Presently he said, during a louder buzz round them:

"I don't think you are quite yourself to-night, somehow. And how is it that I have seen nothing of you for such ages? When may I come?"

"Oh, come to luncheon some day," she said aloud, smiling conventionally. "I must think what we are doing. Will Tuesday suit you? I'll ask Miss Goodeve, and lay the first stone of our friendship," she added in a lower tone.

"I would rather——" he began; and then there was a sudden lull, and Mr. Degraves turned inter-

rogatively to Lady Arthur with a view to a fresh start in conversation.

"Thank you; I shall be delighted," said Kenward, also conventionally; and he, too, applied himself to his legitimate partner.

Nùlma's two neighbours seemed slightly preoccupied. Mr. Blaize was naturally a good deal absorbed in his efforts to catch glimpses of Miss Degraves through the fronds of maidenhair, and to overhear fragments of her conversation with Mr. Van Vechten. He was not well up in Leichardt's Town gossip, and could never get over an unreasoning jealousy of the man whom it was currently known Lady Randal had designed for her friend. Then, he had never met Nùlma before, and though, like everybody else, he was struck by her beauty, he was shy, and the young girl did not help him along.

Captain Textor admired the Australian girl enormously also, but was not at liberty to indulge in such admirations too freely, his heart being engaged in England. Moreover, he took his duties as aide-de-camp very seriously, and was all the time eager to glean information from the talk around which might help him in steering safely through social quicksands. Already there was discussion about the invitations to the Birthday ball, many people having been left out who at the beginning of the Randals' reign were not naturally included in the list, but who had risen in the world since,

and would now be greatly aggrieved were they not bidden. Captain Textor had the matter terribly on his mind. He was tall, thin, well-bred-looking, but rather finnikin, with a beautiful monstache and easy manners. He had plenty of small-talk, but it was not of the kind Nülmia understood, and when he discoursed upon the possibilities of getting up a cotillon at the ball, taking it for granted that she knew all about cotillons and such-like, she showed her ignorance of the things that be so plainly that before long his interest flagged, and, for all her prettiness, he said to himself that she was dull, badly dressed, and “out of it.”

In this judgment as regards her dress, he showed himself to be a commonplace young man of fashion, whose womankind must be attired according to the latest Paris model, or, in his sense, are not dressed at all. Captain Textor was an authority on women's gowns, and could tell one exactly how much stuff would be required for a fashionable skirt, and who was the London tailor or milliner who would turn a lady out properly. Nülmia was not at all properly turned out, in his estimation. The prohibition on “jangles and frippery” had, happily, crippled the exuberance of Miss Orr's fancy, and had resulted in somewhat severe folds of drapery which, under the circumstances, was the best possible result that could have been achieved. So, at any rate, thought those better judges, Mr. Kenward and Lady Arthur, the first

with keen artistic satisfaction, the last with a pang of envy and mortification.

As Nùlma sat silent or monosyllabic, seeing clearly that she did not come up to Captain Textor's standard, and feeling a want of sympathy on the part of her two neighbours, she reflected that she would not, after all, have anything very exciting to tell at Wirrib about the dinner, and be-thought herself of the menu for Mrs. Perryman, which she had no difficulty in abstracting, and of her promise to take back some sweetmeats for Luce. There were plenty of French bonbons, chocolates, and other goodies on the table, and Nùlma heaped her plate liberally and nibbled slowly at one or two, causing Captain Textor to wonder how she would get through the supply before Lady Arthur's signal.

Lady Arthur caught Mrs. Degraves' eye without any elaborate preparation. Captain Textor's head was turned, and Nùlma saw her opportunity, and, as she rose, swept the plateful of bonbons into her handkerchief, which she crumpled together under her fan. She would have made her exit composedly had she not in her nervousness managed, as she turned, to catch the toe of one shoe on the heel of the other, so that the shoe was hopelessly launched some distance under the table. Nùlma sat down again, and tried to fish it out, but in vain, and her agonized whisper across the table, "Uncle Van, my shoe! please get it for me," fell on un-

heeding ears, for Mr. Van Vechten was in the act of pushing back Miss Degraves' chair, so that she might pass in the wake of her mother.

"Have you dropped anything? Can I look for you? Your fan—your gloves? No, I see they're all right," said Captain Textor, pushing back Nülda's chair also; and the girl, too shy to confess that she had lost her shoe, hobbled out, the last of the party of ladies, red, ashamed, but keeping presence of mind enough to thrust the handkerchief with Luce's bonbons into her pocket before she took her seat close by the door in the drawing-room.

No one noticed her mishap. The first fire of the season had been lighted—it was the middle of April—and the ladies were fluttering round it, and Mrs. Degraves was complimenting Lady Arthur upon the way in which she had placed the sofa at an angle with the chimney, and upon having banished the big central ottoman to a remote distance from the chandelier.

"I wish I could banish the chandelier, too," said Lady Arthur, "though, I suppose, it is high treason to say so, if Lady Randal liked it there."

"Dear Lady Randal!" murmured Mrs. Degraves. "We had only one fault to find with her. She did not understand how to make a room cosy. But I suppose the Queen can't utter treason against herself, Lady Arthur; and the Governor should

be in the same position in Government House, shouldn't he?"

"But, then, I am not the Governor," replied Lady Arthur, "though he is good enough to let me have my own way with the chairs and tables. And as to his being a despot in his own colony—well, I wonder what the Ministers would say if the Governor ordered the Botanical Gardens to be cut down and replanted, or insisted on a domiciliary inspection of all the houses, and the measuring out of the water-supply to each. That was what he had to do in Farnesia, which is a Crown colony, you know, when the reservoir threatened to dry up."

"I am afraid that his Excellency will find a difference between a Crown colony and a Constitutional Government," said the wife of the Leader of the Opposition, who was a sharp, thin-lipped lady, priding herself upon a tempered Jacobinism as regards political principles. "A Constitution does not stand being interfered with."

"I am sure that the Governor found that out at Farnesia, though it *was* a Crown colony," said Lady Arthur, laughing—"in the personal sense, I mean. His constitution hasn't got over being confined within a space of eleven square miles and living according to the tender mercies of a native cook. Oh, Miss Goodeve, you are all out in the cold. Won't you come and drink your coffee near the fire?"

The butler had just come in with the coffee-pot, and the footman had nearly brushed over Nùlma as she sat forlorn, her unshod foot tucked well under her skirt. She had decided to take the butler into her confidence, since he looked like a family man, but was picturing her shoe handed across the room to her on a silver salver, and wondering how she could bear the disgrace if it should happen before the gentlemen; and then it flashed across her that she might write a little note and ask the butler to deliver it to Van Vechten, who would find her shoe and bring it to her unobserved.

"No; you really mustn't stop there in the cold," persisted Lady Arthur, and Nùlma was obliged to get up and limp forward.

"Why, you are lame!" cried Lady Arthur.
"What has happened?"

"I have lost my shoe; it fell off under the table," proclaimed Nùlma, with the boldness of desperation, putting out a very slender stockinged foot.
"Please, could it be brought to me?"

Miss Degraves laughed a little ill-naturedly, but Lady Arthur took the occurrence quite as a natural thing to have happened at a dinner-party.

"Of course. Carson, you will have Miss Goodeve's shoe found as soon as the gentlemen have left the table, and bring it to her, please, in the boudoir. My dear child, what it is to have a Cinderella foot, from which shoes drop off incontinently! Do see how tiny it is; and Miss Goodeve is taller even than

you or I, Miss Degraves! I am glad, anyhow, that we have not to go through the ordeal of trying on the slipper. Certainly none of us would get the Prince."

"Which is the Prince?" asked Miss Degraves in her sweet incisive voice, as she put up her long-handled eyeglass and inspected Nùlma, who had not yet been introduced to her.

"Surely you must know a great deal better than I," said Lady Arthur, her tone just suggesting playful malice. "I am a stranger in Leichardt's Land. I can't think of anyone answering to the description but Mr. Van Vechten. They call him the merchant Prince here, don't they?"

Miss Degraves was silenced; with a little laugh she turned away.

"How do you do, my dear?" said Mrs. Degraves, holding out her hand to Nùlma. "I did not recognise you at first, not expecting to meet you at a grown-up party. It's your first, isn't it? and you must feel a little shy, don't you?"

"Yes," replied Nùlma; "but I shan't mind when I have got back my shoe."

"Come and sit by me," Mrs. Degraves went on; "and tell me who is going to chaperon you at the Birthnight ball?"

"No, no!" exclaimed Lady Arthur. "Poor child! she shall not be made to blush before everyone when Carson retrieves the slipper. Come into the little room, my dear; I want to show you a por-

trait which was made of me, by a gentleman whom you know."

She put her arm within Nùlma's, and swept her along through a half-curtained archway as the gentlemen's voices sounded from the hall.

"The men are coming back, and you will have your shoe in a moment. Tell me, what do you think of it?"

She pointed to a kit-cat portrait of herself in oils which stood upon a draped easel near the doorway. The work had evidently been a labour of love, and Lady Arthur's difficult, somewhat feline kind of charm had been happily caught and depicted. Nùlma looked from the portrait to the original and back again. Lady Arthur seemed younger in the picture, more tender and more contented. There was something in the painted smile which the living smile lacked. Nevertheless, it was an admirable likeness.

"Well?" asked Lady Arthur.

"I think it is very beautiful," answered Nùlma slowly, "and it is very like you."

"It was Mr. Kenward who painted it, your new Chief Justice. We are very old friends, and he did that—oh, ever so long ago. Now, dear child, I'm going to tell you why I wanted you to see it, and to ask a favour of you at the same time."

"A favour!" Nùlma repeated.

"It's this way. Mr. Kenward has a great de-

sire to paint you. Of course the picture would be your own—to give to your father if you pleased, and if he liked it; to destroy if he did not like it."

"I think that would be impossible," said Nùlma. "But I can't imagine why Mr. Kenward should want to paint me."

"Hasn't anyone ever told you that your colouring is just what artists dream about, and hardly ever come across in real life. Do me an immense kindness—for with your permission I am promised a small replica—and allow Mr. Kenward to make your picture."

"Why, of course I should be very glad," answered Nùlma. "Why should I not? It is Mr. Kenward and you, too, that are doing me the kindness—and daddy as well. But if I give dad the picture, there will be nothing for Mr. Kenward to make up to him for his trouble."

Lady Arthur did not answer. She was looking at Nùlma in a way that puzzled and rather embarrassed the young girl. Suddenly she said:

"Do you know, child, that you ought to be one of the very happiest creatures on earth. You are young; you are beautiful; you are utterly free. Your whole life is before you to do what you choose with. I envy you; you have got what I never had—never, never."

"Oh, Lady Arthur, how is it possible that I can be as beautiful as you are! And what is my life in comparison with yours! It seems to me

that you have everything, and I nothing. How can it be that you envy me?"

All Nühma's shyness went away as she replied, with eager, surprised eyes fastened upon Lady Arthur's face. A genuine ring of passion and regret in the elder woman's voice stirred the girl intensely. It seemed an echoing note from that far world of romance about which she was always, more or less consciously, dreaming.

" You will understand that better when you are as old as I am," returned Lady Arthur with a laugh.
" Here is Carson with your shoe."

The butler entered by an inner door, bearing Nühma's shoe, as she had pictured it, upon a silver salver, which he discreetly shaded with his other arm.

" There; now you are quite respectable again; and you have a very pretty foot, and need not have been ashamed to exhibit it. I am going to tell Mr. Kenward that he can come and fix a day for the first sitting; and I shall ask your father if he will let you lunch with me next Tuesday. Will you come?"

Nühma accepted the invitation, partly flattered, partly jarred by a certain note of patronage in Lady Arthur's manner, and at the moment peculiarly sensible of that vague mingling of antipathy and fascination which Lady Arthur had from the first produced in her. She was standing bewilderedly before the picture when Kenward, entering from the larger room, approached her.

CHAPTER VIII.

CONFIDENCES.

"Do you think I am good enough?" he asked abruptly.

"Good enough?"

"Why, to have the honour of painting your portrait? Lady Arthur tells me that you consent. Thank you immensely."

"If your picture of me is only a quarter as splendid as this one, I shall be thanking you all the time instead," said Nùlma bluntly. "I wonder—" she stopped.

"What was it you were going to say?"

"Oh, a stupid thing—I was only wondering why you should make so much fuss about doing my picture."

"I think I shall leave Lady Arthur to explain that," he answered. "Perhaps she has already told you why I am so anxious to make a sketch of you. Has she?"

"Lady Arthur said that you wanted to paint me because—oh, well, because you thought my colouring out of the common," said Nùlma with un-

blushing candour. "But there must be so many girls in England ever so much better to paint than I am."

"Only we are not in England, you see. And so," he went on, "admiration is no novelty to you." There was a shade of disappointment in his tone. "No doubt you have often been told that you are—excuse my putting it bluntly—very lovely."

Nùlma seemed to reflect.

"No, not often; hardly at all. Without counting Lady Arthur this evening, I don't think anyone ever in the world told me so—except Uncle Van."

"Uncle Van!"

"I mean Mr. Van Vechten."

"Oh! You seem, anyhow, to have given him the right of plain speaking. But—Mr. Van Vechten is no relation to you. Why do you call him Uncle Van?"

"I don't know. Of course he's no relation; but he's the best friend I have in the world."

"Miss Goodeve, would it be a great impertinence if I were to ask if you are going to marry Mr. Van Vechten?"

"He won't give me the chance," said Nùlma. "He thinks I am too young yet to know my own mind."

"That is very considerate of him. But no doubt before very long he will put the question seriously."

"No," replied Nùlma. "I am quite sure that

he will never ask me. I am to ask him instead. He is willing to marry me whenever I tell him that is what I wish. It is very devoted of him."

"Oh, the devotion!—that's easily taken for granted. Well, I suppose one should admit that the distinction is a magnanimous one."

"Don't let us talk about Uncle Van," said Nùlma, turning away from the picture. "There are so many other things."

Kenward gave a short laugh. He found something rather humorous in the situation; and the thought glanced across his mind that a man very much in love with Nùlma need not entertain any jealous animosity towards Mr. Van Vechten. He pushed forward a low chair which stood in the shadow of the door-curtain and of a tree-fern in a green tub.

"Won't you sit here?"

Nùlma sat down without hesitation. She did not make the conventional objection that she was staying too long away from the rest of the party; and of this he was glad, though, to be sure, it was not to be expected that the owner of that face would put forth those commonplace airs and affectations which seem natural to the ordinary newly-fledged miss. As for Nùlma, the fortunate recovery of her shoe had quite relieved her from social embarrassments; she was perfectly happy talking to the Chief Justice, and did not trouble herself at all as to what the people in the next room might be thinking of

her. The babble of their talk floated in through the half-drawn curtains, and now and then words, phrases, and tones detached themselves from the general confusion of sound. Through all Kenward was conscious of the hovering presence of Lady Arthur, and of frequent darting glances in his direction from between her narrowed lids, as she conversed painstakingly with the Leader of the Opposition, and did her duty by the ladies neglected of mankind. Somehow she seemed to contrive that her position should command that of Nùlma and Kenward, and it was with a vague instinct of escape that he had put Nùlma in the chair behind the tree-fern, and now placed himself near her, also in shadow.

"I quite agree with you," he said, "that there are things and people in the world more interesting than your friend Mr. Van Vechten. Let us talk about one of them instead—as you suggest."

"Oh, I didn't mean that," cried the girl, smitten with compunction. "There's no one anywhere so good as Uncle Van."

"Very likely. But some good people are more attractive as subjects of conversation than other good people, though, as far as moral worth goes, they may be equal. For example, Miss Goodeve, I should be more interested in talking to you of yourself than of Mr. Van Vechten. And there's a question I am longing to ask you, if you don't mind."

"I shan't mind. What is it?"

"Where did you get your pretty, uncommon name—Nùlma? It sounds Eastern. Nùlma, Nour-mahal—I could think of others like it. But I've never heard yours before. Please tell me about your name."

"It's the Blacks' word for a snake," she answered; "and I was called Nùlma because of a terribly sad thing which happened when I was a tiny baby."

"May I hear, or would it be too painful?"

"Oh no; I was only a few days old. Of course, I can't feel about it as daddy does. It's because of that I've no mother, and no brother nor sister. They all died then."

"Mother, brother, and sister," he repeated; "they could not all have been killed by a snake-bite. How can that be?"

"My baby brother and sister died from the bite of a snake. I'll tell you." Nùlma folded her hands with the responsible air of one about to make a narration, and he leaned a little closer to her. "You have never been out West," she said. "Of course not yet. But perhaps you will go some day, and then you'll see the great, great plains, and the brigalow scrubs, and the carriers' drays. Daddy was a carrier out West before he found the Goodeve Consolation Reef and got rich. He was only a working man, you know."

"No, I did not know."

"We don't mind in the least," said Nùlma, with a little drawing back of her body which amused him, as betraying her secret thought; "though I have no doubt the Degraves and other people look down upon us for it."

"Isn't that an unwarranted assumption, rather?"

"Well, we can't all be English, and—like Lady Arthur Keefe," Nùlma exclaimed.

"No, of course; there's no reason why you should; and, besides, you are much better as you are."

"Oh, no, no! I'd like to be like that. Mr. Kenward, I wasn't telling the truth," she cried in a burst of candour. "I *do* mind. It's mean of me to pretend that I don't. Not the being a carrier's daughter; and if daddy could be changed into a great English lord to-morrow, I would not have it done. I wouldn't have him a bit different. But I do mind being outside all the things that are English and beautiful and refined. Though 'plenty poor cobra belonging to me,' as the Blacks say;" and she touched her forehead with a laugh, "and though I am dreadfully badly educated, I do read about those English sort of things."

"Ah, in novels, I suppose?"

"Yes. Though dad doesn't much care about my reading novels, or Uncle Van either; but Luce Perrymen lends them to me. Her mother subscribes to the library in Victoria Street. Oh, I'd give anything to go to England, so that I might

see the places they describe! And I'm always wishing that I could meet the people in real life, the people who belong to books."

"Perhaps you wouldn't recognize them," said Kenward dryly; "or if you did, you wouldn't find them as delightful as you imagine them to be."

"Yes, I should. I recognised Lady Arthur. She comes out of a book——"

"And you find her delightful?"

Nùlma hesitated.

"I don't know. She is strange—she is very kind. She says things that no one else ever said; she is just a bit of that world to which I don't belong. Can you understand?"

"Yes, I think I understand. But you exaggerate the importance of that world, and your own position towards it."

"Well, never mind."

"Yes; never mind. Now, tell me more of those early days; I can't describe to you how deeply it all interests me."

"Well," she began again, "daddy was a carrier. He used to carry wool from the stations to Port Victoria, and take back rations. Often he would be weeks on the road—sometimes stopped for days in one place. There would be floods, or the bullocks would knock up, and he'd have to spell them a bit. There was no other house for us but the bullock dray. Mr. Kenward, I was born under

a bullock dray;" and she gave him one of her quick, deerlike looks.

"Were you, really? That is very curious. Go on, Miss Nülmā."

"I don't remember living on the bullock dray myself; but I've seen them out West, when I was eight or nine, coming in—whole strings of them. Such huge things, loaded ever so high with bales of wool, quite flat on the top, with a sort of tilt, and a mattress laid under it, where the wife and children would sit. They would have a ladder to go up and down by. Often there would be two or three goats behind the dray, to give milk for the babies. At night, when they camped, the mattresses would be brought down and laid under the dray, and that's where the family would sleep."

Kenward looked at this very child of Nature wondering, as he pictured her cradled in a bullock dray, her babyhood passed on the top of the wool-bales, with only a sheet of canvas to shut out the high heavens. He felt an odd glow of pleasure in the fact that she was—as she was. Nülmā went on, encouraged by the eagerness in his eyes:

"We were camping at a place where there was a waterhole, spelling the bullocks, and waiting for my mother to get strong. I was just the tiniest thing then, you know. Daddy fixed the mattress on the ground under the dray, and spread blankets at one end for the other little boy and girl. He has told me all about it, poor dad! My mother must

have been a very nice woman, Mr. Kenward, I've often thought, for him to be so devoted to her memory."

"I am quite certain she must have been that," said the Chief Justice decidedly.

"The first night daddy and mother were wakened up by a sort of cry from the little boy. Daddy went to take it up, they cuddled it, and the little fellow got quite quiet and drowsy, and very soon died. Did you know, Mr. Kenward, that a snake's bite gives you an electric-shock sort of pain—just for a minute?"

"No; I had never heard."

"Yes. Daddy was bitten once, he told me."

"A snake had bitten the poor little chap?" said Kenward.

"Yes; but they did not know it then. They saw nothing—never thought of its being a snake. Daddy said they fancied he had eaten some poisonous berries that grew about there. Well, next night exactly the same thing happened, and the little girl died. Then, as daddy moved the blankets, he saw a black snake, and he found that he had laid the children to sleep exactly over a snake's hole."

"Good God!" ejaculated Kenward. "And your poor mother?"

"Mother went quite out of her mind, daddy said. She got queer fancies—all about snakes, fairy stories she had read, and Blacks' superstitions mixed up. Did I tell you we had a half-caste

woman, with a picaninny, for a sort of nurse? Dad saved her from the camp when they were going to knock her over the head with a nulla-nulla. She used to talk Blacks' language to the children. Daddy told me mother kept repeating things she had heard the gin say, and she would point to me, and call out, 'Nùlma, Nùlma!' She made dad get a Prayer-Book and a billyful of water, and christen me himself—out there in the Bush. She had a superstitious notion that if I was called Nùlma snakes would not touch me. And it preyed upon her that the baby-girl had died unbaptized; that's how it is."

Nùlma stopped.

"And your mother died?" said Kenward.

"Yes; on the top of the bullock dray. She would insist on being lifted up there; and that's where she died, lying on the wool-bales. She's buried in the Bush with the two children. Dad had the place railed in, and a stone put. I was christened properly after that—at Mr. Latham's station. He was my godfather, and Mrs. Latham and the storekeeper's wife were my two godmothers. Of course, dad had to keep the name my mother chose; and so I am Nùlma. After all, it is not an ugly name, is it, Mr. Kenward?"

"I think it is a beautiful name," he answered.

"But I wish it didn't mean just what it does. A snake—horrible! How I loathe the sight of a snake! Try to forget that 'Nùlma' means that,

or you'll be associating me always with something horrible."

"I'll remember always that 'Nùlma' means—you," said Kenward; "and then the word can only bring me a most sweet and poetic association."

"But you can't associate me with myself," said the girl, laughing; "that would be nonsense. Think of something Australian and poetic, and imagine that it is called Nùlma."

Kenward got up, looked round the room, and seemed to consider. Nùlma watched him with a certain child-like curiosity and pleasure. He took a bit of stephanotis out of a vase and examined it, then put it back again.

"Too exotic and suggestive," he murmured. "Ah, I have it!" He turned to Nùlma. "When does your own wattle come into bloom?"

"At the end of August or beginning of September. Ever so long yet."

Kenward attacked another vase, in which was an abnormal second bloom—a trailing bough of Banksia roses. He broke off a spray of half-opened buds.

"I think this will do—for the present. It is sweet, and if not pure Australian, it is, anyhow, poetic. Miss Nùlma, in August, with your permission, I will solemnly rechristen the wattle, which I shall henceforth regard as emblematic of you. In the meantime, allow me to offer you this as the nearest thing suitable."

She took the spray of roses, twisted it, smelt it, and stuck it into the belt of her frock.

"How clever of you! I always call the wattle my flower, for I generally gather the first bit that's out on my birthday—the eighteenth of August. I shall be eighteen on the eighteenth of August."

"The eighteenth of August; I shall not forget."

"How did you come to know anything about our wattle?" she asked.

"They call it mimosa on the shores of the Mediterranean," he answered. "But it's genuine Australian, for all that."

He became aware of a flutter of departure in the next room. Mrs. Degraves was saying good-night, and Lady Arthur was now standing near the curtains; so was Mr. Van Vechten. Just then Mr. Goodeve's burly form approached.

"Girlie," he said, "we've got to be going." The portrait attracted him as he spoke. "That's good!" he exclaimed; "it's uncommonly like."

Nùlma burst into a laugh.

"Dad, would you care to have a portrait of me painted by the person who painted that?"

"Why, yes," said James Goodeve; "I shouldn't mind, if the price was any way reasonable. I suppose it's by one of the swell chaps in England?"

He turned to Kenward.

"Oh no," said Kenward; "quite an unknown artist—an amateur of no pretensions whatever."

"Well," said Goodeve, peering into the picture, "I don't call myself a judge of paintings, seeing that I've had no opportunity of studying them—it isn't likely I should be; but I know a good likeness, and I will say that's the very image of Lady Arthur. A little flattering, eh?"—in an undertone—"but I dare say she was younger when that was done. What's the mischief, missie?"

"Nothing, dad." Nùlma stifled another laugh. "Come along; I'm ready."

Kenward fell back. James Goodeve held out his red hand to his hostess, who had come near the group.

"We'll say good-night, Lady Arthur, and—I've had a very pleasant evening. Thank you for being kind to my girl here."

"I'm so glad, Mr. Goodeve. You won't forget that you've promised your daughter to me for next Tuesday. I'm delighted that you like my portrait. I think the Governor's over there talking to Mr. Degraves and my husband."

Captain Textor, who had been hovering round, opening doors and conducting ladies to their wraps, made a movement to pilot them towards the Governor, who came forward as they approached. Nùlma felt a little frightened of Colonel Burnside, who looked stiff, old and unapproachable. His severe courtesy awed her. In her nervousness she forgot Luce's bonbons, fumbled for her gloves, pulled out her pocket-handkerchief, and started

back with a cry of dismay—as the fondants and chocolates rained upon the carpet. The Governor peered down through his eyeglass, Captain Textor stooped and picked up the gloves, but left the bonbons, and Nùlma, first pink, then pale, in her confusion, as unconsciously she turned an appealing glance to her saviour, Van Vechten, met Kenward's amused eyes, and shrank as if a blow had been dealt her. She did not mind the others so much, but that he should laugh at her—should look upon her as a greedy schoolgirl, discovered in a vulgar theft upon the dinner-table! Her lips trembled. She looked as though she were going to burst into tears.

"Why, girlie," said her father, "you shouldn't steal the lollies, you know. Mrs. Perryman will call that pretty manners. She is only a baby, your Excellency, and babies can't resist lollipops."

"They weren't for myself," cried Nùlma. "Oh, don't think that I should do it for myself; but I promised poor Luce. She has hurt her back, and she can't come out now at the May ball, and she does so like chocolate creams, and I said I would bring her some from my first dinner-party. It's so hard for Luce to be lying there, seeing me dressed up and having fun, and to get nothing herself."

"Luce," said the Governor, a little perplexed by the whole scene. "Your sister, Miss Goodeve, who has had an accident? I am sincerely sorry."

"Not her sister, your Excellency. Little Luce

Perryman—daughter of our neighbour, Perryman, of the Mines Department—a great friend of my girlie's," said James Goodeve. "Never mind the lollipops, Nùlma. His Excellency will excuse you, I'm certain. So say good-night."

"Your kind thought for your sick friend does you infinite credit, my dear young lady," said the Governor, bowing over Nùlma's hand with stately courtesy. "Pray give her my compliments, and tell her how much I regret her accident; and you must take her some chocolate-creams from me. Textor, you'll see about it."

"Certainly, sir." And Captain Textor rang the bell, and offered Nùlma his arm; and Lady Arthur came up and laughed kindly, and sent her regards to sick Luce, and they all covered poor Nùlma's retreat in the kindest way possible, Captain Textor at the last moment rushing down the steps to lay a little beribboned box by Nùlma's side in the jingle which was to take the father and daughter back to the Bunyas.

"With the Governor's compliments—straight from Paris," he said, laughing. "Good-night, Miss Goodeve."

"Well, Nùlma, so you've gone and done it now," said James Goodeve, with his gruff, tender laugh. "No; it's quite clear that my girl must have her manners polished a little better before she goes to another dinner-party at Government House."

"Oh, dad, it was dreadful! First I lost my shoe under the table, and the butler brought it in on a silver tray. Then to drop Luce's sweets on the floor, and be found out like that! How shall I ever face them again?"

James Goodeve roared with laughter.

"Lost her shoe, did she, poor little Lulu? I hadn't heard of that. And it was brought in on a silver salver. Oh! what am I to do with this girlie?"

"I don't know, dad."

"Have her taught manners, eh? The worst of it is that I ain't a particularly smart hand at manners myself; and if I was to be put on my oath, Lulu, I wouldn't swear that I hadn't disgraced myself, too, at this very dinner-party. The queer dishes bothered me, and the flunkeys and wines, and all the rest of the dashed show. I tell you what it is, Lulu: though I've been in training for exhibition these last six or seven years, I believe I'd be more at home now over a billy of tea and a damper by the camp-fire than I am at this kind of flash set-out. I'm out of it, in the manners line, anyhow; and all Mrs. Perryman's lectures don't seem to have come to much."

"No, dad."

Nühma was silent for a long time, and James Goodeve fumbled about in the inner pocket of his overcoat, and at last produced a brown pipe and indiarubber pouch, carefully wrapped up in a red

silk pocket-handkerchief, so that no odour of strong tobacco should pollute his evening-suit. He filled his pipe, lighted it, and began to smoke, rolling up the leather curtain on one side of the jingle, thus allowing the fumes to escape into the night. They were a good way beyond the Government House gates. The driver of the jingle whipped on his horse, and the clumsy vehicle clattered down Victoria Street, its noise drowning the little disappointed sigh Nùlma heaved, as she leaned sideways against the iron supports of the canopy, and gave herself up to meditation. She was thinking of Kenward. He had not joined in the little chorus of kind speeches and cordial good-nights which had followed upon her discomfiture; but had stood apart; and Nùlma flushed now, and slrank into herself again, as she remembered the glance, half of fun, half of pity, which she had surprised in his eyes. He had not said good-night to her. Had she disgusted him utterly? Had he been waiting for her to put out her hand, or was it possible he had kept aloof from a wish not to add to her embarrassment? No; it was much more likely that he had not thought her worth troubling about—a greedy, forward creature, who was just amusing as a type of an Australian girl, without manners or education, but with hair, eyes, and complexion that would make a good study in yellows and browns. That was all he thought about.

Nùlma heaved a louder sigh, an ejaculation,

rather, of self-discontent, and of a vague pain—pain such as she had never before in her life experienced. Her father heard the sigh, and, feeling for her hand, took it in his and fondled it.

"Never mind, Lulu! I was only chaffing. Who minds if a pretty girl drops her shoe and steals the lollipops? It quite shook up the old Governor; and that was a pretty speech, wasn't it, now, that he made to you? We must be sure and give Luce his message. Come, don't be cast down, child. I can tell you they all cotton to you in a way that made your old dad as proud as Punch. You're to lunch with Lady Arthur on Tuesday. That's a taking woman—no nonsensical pride about her. Just you watch her ways, and you won't need to go to Mrs. Perryman's for lessons in manners."

It was clear that Lady Arthur had taken pains to be agreeable to the Minister of Mines—clear, also, that Goodeve's faith in Mrs. Perryman as a social authority had been a little shaken.

Nùlma was silent. She reflected that the driver, with whom they were sitting back to back, might perhaps hear what they were saying, though the breeze from the river blew her father's words away in front of them into the night; and, besides, she had an odd-mixed feeling about Lady Arthur—about many other things connected with the dinner-party—which she knew instinctively her father would never understand. Goodeve went on fondling his child's hand, but somehow, for the very

first time in Nùlma's life, his touch irritated rather than soothed her. She was disagreeably aware of the bony protuberances, the shaggy hairs, the enlarged joints, of her father's hand, and had a sudden vision of Kenward's long, smooth, artistic fingers. The contrast between the two hands seemed typical of the immense gulf which divided her own being, her circumstances and upbringing from those of the men and women with whom she had just parted—the four men and the one woman who made up the Government House family. That first faint sense of jar between herself and her father gave the girl the keenest pain. She did not understand it; she only felt it. With a little wriggling movement she withdrew her hand, and, catching at her belt, drew out the spray of drooping buds Kenward had given her. Their faint fragrance half angered, half thrilled her. It recalled that speech of his, that she had herself provoked, in which he had given her for her emblem the wattle flower. Oh, well, it was a very appropriate comparison, she thought bitterly. His rejection of the stephanotis as "too exotic and suggestive"—she recalled his murmured words—suddenly took an unsuspected and humiliating meaning. She was just a bit of wild Bush wattle—a weed, pretty in its way, nice to paint, perhaps, but only a weed. Not the sort of flower to decorate a drawing-room, or to be placed in such bouquets as he might offer to Lady Arthur Keefe. A weed that would just

make a pretty picture, because it was "genuine Australian," and then be thrown away!

Poor Nùlma! It was a new phase of life upon which she was entering this evening. Always before she had been in harmony with her surroundings, and the little inward tumult of vague conjecture and romantic longings of which she was always conscious had been only a pleasant excitement—a sort of stirring refrain to the tranquil song of existence. To-night the refrain had become an aching discord, and the pleasant excitement had turned suddenly into a passionate pain. What was the use of going among people like that? Her father was quite right: they two would be more at home over a billy of tea and a damper by a camp-fire than at a grand dinner-table where lords and ladies sat. Nùlma, in her childish ignorance and mortification, exaggerated the social importance of the Arthur Keefes after a manner at which Lady Arthur, could she have known, would have smiled bitterly under the smarting knowledge of her disappointed ambitions. Yes, Nùlma said to herself, her father and she were of a different kind from all those Government House people. They had come from bullock-drivers; she had been born under a bullock dray—anyhow, she was glad that she had told Kenward that; they were rough and coarse and ignorant. Where should they have learned those arts and accomplishments which made up such a woman as Lady Arthur?—or even Mrs. De-

graves, who, as all Leichardt's Town knew, held her head high because she had come of a good old English family? And such men as the stately old Governor and his nephew, who, in spite of a certain heavy simplicity, had the unmistakable stamp of birth and education; such men, too, as the Chief Justice, or even Captain Textor. Nùlma did not include Caspar Van Vechten in her summary, and yet the thought struck her as she recalled him now, that he did not seem out of place among those other men—had even shown to advantage in his quiet, reserved way. She had looked upon him as belonging to her world; now she began to see that he belonged to the other world, too. The inhabitants of that world might laugh at herself and her father, might tolerate them—even be amused at them in their kind, pitying fashion—but they would not laugh at or tolerate Van Vechten. He would always hold his own. Nùlma found relief and some restoration of her self-confidence in this conception of him. More and more he came to represent in her mind the notion of an ultimate support. And yet she remembered she had hardly spoken a word to him all the evening. But, then, he had been there; his eyes had often met hers; and she had felt herself enveloped by his protecting tenderness.

CHAPTER IX.

“ IS IT ALL PAST?”

THE Chief Justice did not come forward to take his leave till after all the Leichardtstonians had departed. He was so intimate with the Government House party that it seemed a matter of course for him to remain and take part in the discussion which was sure to follow the entertainment of these new guests. But Colonel Burnside's ponderous criticisms upon the social attitude of the Leader of the Opposition towards the Minister of Mines were interrupted by the return of Captain Textor and Lord Arthur, after seeing off the Degraves, Captain Textor carrying the Governor's mail-bag, which was always sent up immediately upon the arrival of the English mail, before ordinary letters were even sorted.

“ The English mail is in, sir,” he said.

Lady Arthur looked up with languid concern. The file of telegrams from Albany, which had preceded the mail by a day or two—for in those days there was no direct cable communication, and the news of the declaration of war between France and

Germany and the defeat at Sedan arrived simultaneously—had taken off the edge of curiosity with regard to public affairs, and her private interests were centred in Leichardt's Land. The Governor paused in his remark to make a sign to his aide-de-camp, intimating that he would examine the despatches in his private room. He was red-tapish in such matters.

“I am coming in, Textor. Arthur, I should like to have notes made at once of anything important that may require my consideration. You will excuse me, Kenward.”

“I was just going to say good-night, sir,” replied Kenward as he took the Governor's hand.

“Oh, stay a few minutes till they bring me in my letters,” exclaimed Lady Arthur. “And I want to settle with you about Tuesday.”

The heavy curtains fell behind the Governor and the aide-de-camp. Lord Arthur, however, lingered, stolidly irresolute.

“The Governor wants you to write despatches, Arthur,” said his wife. Then her tone altered suddenly. “Won't they keep till to-morrow?” she added meekly. That slumberous gleam in her husband's heavy eyes roused again the morbid terror which attacked her so often in those days.

“I'm afraid his Excellency won't think so.” Lord Arthur looked at his watch, and slowly snapped it to.

“Writing despatches at 11.30 p.m. is a beastly

bore," he said. "That's an uncommonly pretty girl you were talking to all this evening, Kenward."

"She is Mr. Kenward's child of Nature," put in Lady Arthur. "I told you that was what he'd end in."

"Oh, well, she's uncommonly pretty," said Lord Arthur; and added: "Well, good-night. You'll have your letters directly, Margot." He went out; at the door he turned. "I think you'd better not sit up too long," he said to Lady Arthur. "What's that about Tuesday?"

"The child of Nature is coming to luncheon," she replied shrilly. "Mr. Kenward is going to paint her portrait, and I am to sit by and do propriety."

"Oh, well, I hope the picture will be as successful as yours, Margot. Good-night, Kenward. You'll look after yourself; there are drinks in the hall."

The two were alone. Margot's eyes had a wild expression as they rested for a moment on Kenward's face. As soon as the door had closed upon her husband, she gave a little gasping breath as if she wanted air. Then she moved abruptly into the inner room, and stood over the fire, her arms on the mantelpiece, apparently lost in contemplation of the point of her dainty shoe.

"I haven't such a small foot as your child of Nature," she said.

“No?” He seemed puzzled. “It’s quite small enough for your height, and I’ve always told you no one ever had such an arched instep.” He looked down at her shoe also as he took up his position by the mantelpiece beside her.

“That shoe episode was very funny,” Lady Arthur went on. “She is a most ingenuous creature—as she should be—your child of Nature. Did you know that she left her shoe behind her under the dinner-table?”

“No.”

“Perhaps she isn’t used to wearing them. Carson brought it in to her here, and we had an opportunity of observing that her foot is a pretty one. The effect would have been better if she had worn silk stockings.”

Kenward felt jarred. He said nothing.

“It was very ingenuous, too—the abstraction of the bonbons. Uncle Burnside quite rose to the occasion. Was it the story of the sick friend she was telling you all that time you were together in here? If so, the sick friend must be immensely interesting, judging from the expression of your face.”

“No,” replied Kenward shortly. “The story was not about the sick friend.”

“Might one be permitted to ask what it was about?”

“Certainly. Miss Goodeve was telling me”—Kenward hesitated a moment—“telling me that

she had been born under a bullock dray; that her only brother and sister had died of snake-bite when she was a day or two old, and that the shock had killed her mother also."

"Ah!" Lady Arthur looked interested. "Yes, I remember. That must have been the sad story she would not speak of before her father. It was very confiding of her to tell you. I asked her where she had got her name—Nùlma, which in the aboriginal tongue means, she told me, a snake."

"It was her dying mother's fancy. They christened her Nùlma out there in the Bush."

Just then the butler came in with a pile of letters.

"Lord Arthur told me to bring you these, my lady."

Margot took the letters, glancing at the envelopes one by one, and laid them on the mantelpiece.

"I'd better go," Kenward said; "you want to read your letters."

"No, I do not. They will keep."

She was silent for a minute or two; then again she turned on him that long, wild look. He came closer to her.

"Margot," he said, in a low voice, "what is the matter?"

"Nothing. Only I think I am experiencing the preliminary throes of martyrdom; and I'm wonder-

ing whether I've got the courage to go through with it."

"Martyrdom! I don't understand you."

"No, I suppose not. It was only during dinner that I made my plan of martyrdom. And you have lent yourself to it admirably, though, of course, you were not conscious of doing so." She spoke bitterly.

"In what way?" he asked coldly.

"I gave you your chance of freedom that night on the steamer," she answered, "and you wouldn't take it. Well, am I not showing my entire confidence in your loyalty by arranging unlimited opportunities for you of flirtation with that girl whom you admire so greatly?"

"Oh, so that's it?" He spoke irritably, then went on in a calmer tone: "Yes; I do admire her. Is that what you mean by your martyrdom? My dear, what is the use of it? Haven't we settled all that?"

He stooped as he spoke, and, on a sudden impulse, bent his head to her shoulder, and touched her neck with his lips twice lingeringly. In an instant the whole expression of her face changed.

"Oh, Outram! But you mustn't! This isn't dear London. And I sometimes think the orderlies and footmen are spies. Arthur is jealous." Her voice had sunk to an agitated whisper.

Kenward's brows contracted. He had not

thought of Lord Arthur. " You never told me. Has he said anything to you?"

" No—yes; *you* need not mind. He is horribly fond of me. And I'm frightened—I'm frightened."

" You poor little thing!" The man's tenderness woke up. " It's all fancy. Don't worry over that kind of thing. Now, we agreed, you know, that the past was to be—past. We're behaving splendidly."

" Are we? Is it all past?" She touched her shoulder with a laugh, the sound of which gave him an odd pain; it was like the echo of dead raptures. " Oh, Outram, how long since you did that! It's nonsense—nonsense about our keeping only friends. I can't help it. I must—once!"

She put her two hands on his shoulders and lifted her face to his. The hands stole round his neck, and they kissed each other—or, it would be more correct to say, she kissed him in a short, fevered uniting of lips.

Before Tuesday came, Nùlma's mood of revolt against social circumstance, and her half-formed determination not to allow Kenward the privilege of perpetuating on canvas his wattle simile, had passed away; and she was again almost her old happy self. A friendly little note from Lady Arthur, ratifying the invitation, written under the reactionary influence of Kenward's new tenderness, had removed the impression that all the people at

Government House were amusing themselves by making fun of her. It must be owned that this self-consciousness was very unlike Nùlma, but, somehow, her confidence in herself seemed to have had a shake. Moreover, at the Executive Council, two days after the dinner, the Governor himself had inquired particularly of the Minister of Mines after his charming daughter, who had in the midst of her own gaieties so unselfishly remembered her friend. And then Caspar Van Vechten had come out at the worst time of her dejection, had taken her for a good canter on the Arab, had soothed, comforted and admired her, and had put her on good terms again with herself and the world.

It was so pleasant to be able to tell Uncle Van just what she had been feeling—with the exception of those emotions relating peculiarly to her father and to Mr. Kenward, which she kept to herself—and to be certain of his sympathy and comprehension. He had been just a little bit stiff at first, she fancied, but when she had expressed her regret at having had no talk with him at the Government House dinner-party, he had thawed at once; and after all, as they agreed, what did it matter about not conversing in company, when he could come out whenever he pleased to the Bunyas, and they could talk so much more pleasantly and confidentially there? He had not seemed so sympathetic, Nùlma thought, when she had told him about the picture. He asked whether her father had been

consulted on the subject, and when Nülmá explained that the portrait was to be a present to Mr. Goodeve on his birthday in the following October, Van Vechten observed that possibly Mr. Goodeve might not care to be placed under an obligation of that kind to a stranger, and that, anyhow, mysteries were a mistake, and the thing ought to be square and above-board. He was not even satisfied when he heard that Lady Arthur Keefe was sponsor, so to speak, of the whole project; and the end of it was that Nülmá took the best course that could possibly be taken, and at dinner that evening told her father, in the presence of Van Vechten, all about the proposed undertaking.

Contrary to Mr. Van Vechten's suggestion, James Goodeve showed no unwillingness to incur the obligation. Perhaps he did not consider the acceptance of a mere work of art in the light of an obligation, any more than he would have considered it an obligation to accept a friend's photograph. It would be a very different thing if the Chief Justice painted for money. But, then, who could conceive a Chief Justice painting for money? He did it for pleasure and recreation, and what greater pleasure could be offered a man than that of sitting opposite Nülmá, being entertained by her prattle and personal opinions, and given full opportunity for studying her charm? This was Mr. Goodeve's private and personal opinion, which he did not publicly announce, but he made it pretty

clear that he considered the obligation to be on his own side. Then he was flattered by Lady Arthur's part in the affair, and by Nùlma's ready admission into the charmed circle of Government House. No looking down now, by the Degraves set, upon his daughter, and no need to perplex himself as to a chaperon for her in the coming gaieties. Lady Arthur and the Governor would chaperon her. She would be put straight away at the top of the tree—that was how he phrased it—and in the end who could tell what might not happen? But here James Goodeve's self-congratulations received a check. The end would mean Nùlma's marriage, and did he want Nùlma, his pride, his darling, to make a grand marriage into a family which would despise and shunt her father because he had once been a bullock-driver? What if his own precautions against contact for her with the vulgar herd, his jealous guarding of her from the admiration of Leichardt's Town youths, his care to preserve her fresh and unsullied by boarding-school notions? were all to be turned against him? What if, in striving to keep his jewel out of the hands of the polishers, he had made it only the more valuable and flawless a possession, to be filched from him the more readily by greedy fortune-hunters? He had so carefully kept from the world the fact that he was rich, had lived so quietly and so plainly, that no one might guess Nùlma would be an heiress; but he could not hide from the world her beauty and her

grace. They had shone out and conquered, and he was proud even to snobbish delight in the favour of the great, and yet he was sore and troubled.

Something of all these mingled feelings he confided to Caspar Van Vechten, after Nùlma had gone to bed, as the two men sat over their pipes in the veranda. Perhaps he may have had a motive in so doing. There was something wistful in the tone with which he added: "I wish I could see Lulu married to some really good fellow with a stake in the country, who'd not take my girl away from her father and teach her to be ashamed of those who gave her birth. Some chap who was a gentleman, and as good as any of the fine English lot over there"—Goodeve jerked his head riverwards, presumably in the direction of Government House—"but who had worked his way, too, and knew what roughing it meant. A man of character, and not too young, for Lulu is a bit headstrong, and needs guiding."

He paused and looked searchingly at Van Vechten, who was leaning back on his squatter's chair, his strongly-moulded face as impassive as though he had no anxiety whatever on the subject of Nùlma's future; but his voice trembled a little as he answered:

"That's all very well, Goodeve; but there's one thing you've left out of your calculations. Nùlma has a will of her own, as you say; and she is a girl of very strong feelings, and likely to develop still

stronger feelings when she becomes a woman, or I am very greatly mistaken. You'll have to take Nùlma's own character and opinions into account, I fancy. Suppose such a man as you describe were hanging round, and pleased to marry your daughter to-morrow; it wouldn't be of much use, would it, if she didn't care for him?"

"Of course she would care for him. A girl as young as Nùlma is always ready to care for a good-looking, gentlemanly, sterling fellow who is in love with her, and whom all the other women in the place would jump at for a husband."

Van Vechten moved his head slowly from its position against the back of the chair, and sat straight up. He had taken his cigar from his mouth, and was contemplating its burnt end.

"When I was a young man," he said, "I had that notion too, and I bothered a woman into marrying me on the principle that where liking was love would certainly come. The woman ran away from me with another man. Since then I've come to the conclusion that to persuade into marriage a young girl who doesn't know her own mind is a dangerous experiment, and one which a man isn't morally justified in making."

"Good God, Van Vechten!" exclaimed James Goodeve. "So that is the story behind you, is it? I always guessed there was one, but I didn't imagine it was this kind of thing."

"Nor anyone else in Leichardt's Land. I've

spoken about it to no living soul in these ten years past, and I rely upon your honour, Goodeve, to keep it to yourself."

Goodeve nodded; no other assurance was necessary.

"And the woman?" he said. "You don't mean to tell me that you're bound still. What has become of the woman?"

"Divorced—and dead," replied Van Vechten laconically. "Divorced, that is, according to civil law," he added. "For me, as a strict Catholic, there's no such thing as divorce."

"Ha, as a strict Catholic," repeated Goodeve doubtfully; "you and I have agreed to differ on that point, Caspar. It's small odds to me, though I'd walk ten miles to get out of the way of an Irish priest. I suppose there are good Papists in the world as well as bad ones. Only how there came to be Papists at all is a puzzle."

"A man is what inheritance and tradition have made him," said Van Vechten. "In the nature of things, a Dutch Catholic is bound to be what you Protestants would call a bigoted Papist."

"You needn't shove me into the Protestant boiling," said Goodeve roughly. "I'm not much on religion—never have been since I lost Jenny and the little ones out West. I couldn't stomach Providence after that. My creed is a short one. 'Owe no man anything, and keep a clean tally,' that's enough for me. The religious side of the

question don't affect me. Anyhow," he added abruptly, after a moment's pause, "I'm glad the woman is dead."

Van Vechten was silent, too, and both men smoked on for several minutes without speaking; then Goodeve said only, "Have a glass of grog, won't you?" and, rising, helped himself from the decanter of brandy which stood on a small table near. "Nights beginning to get a bit chilly," he said; "I expect this'll be about our last sit out in the veranda after dinner."

Van Vechten got up, too. Simultaneously the two men faced each other, looking straight into each other's eyes. Van Vechten held out his hand, which Goodeve grasped. They understood each other.

"You're a man of few words, Caspar," said Goodeve; "but I'd trust you as far as hell's gates."

CHAPTER X.

LADY ARTHUR'S MARTYRDOM.

NÙLMA's first sitting went off quite satisfactorily. A sort of waiting-room, scarcely used by the members of the Executive, and which had a northern aspect, was turned into a studio, a model's platform was rigged up, and Nùlma placed thereon; while Lord Arthur, Captain Textor, and even the Governor himself, came in to give their opinion as to the position in which she should be represented. No mystery was made about the business. Nùlma told Lady Arthur that her father was greatly pleased at Mr. Kenward's proposal, and Kenward made a point of calling at the Mines Office and thanking the Minister for the privilege accorded him. He liked Nùlma for having consulted her father. There was a certain dignity in her frankness which put her upon a higher level. But he was not so pleased when he learned that it was Van Vechten who had inspired her frankness.

Anyhow, a rumour soon went round Leichardt's Town that the Chief Justice, who was a great ama-

teur artist, had been so struck by Nùlma Goodeve's beauty that he had requested permission to paint her portrait—as though permission were necessary for what ought to be considered a great honour!—and that Lady Arthur had actually arranged for the sittings to take place at Government House. Was it possible she wished to arrange a match also? and if so, what was to become of Mr. Van Vechten? This was what Miss Caroline Degraves asked herself, and, without serious premeditation, her manner became a little colder to Justin Blaize. At any rate, the vague rumours of Kenward's attachment to the Governor's niece-in-law, which had begun to float about Leichardt's Town, seemed thus contradicted, and it appeared that Lady Arthur's martyrdom was already bearing fruit.

But what a martyrdom it was! Many times she wondered to herself, as she had wondered to Kenward, whether she had the courage to go through with it. To sit there with that interminable piece of arabesque embroidery between her fingers, and watch the man she loved apparently absorbed in the fresh graces and charms of this young girl, whom she already looked upon as her rival; to see the picture growing, and note the keen interest of the artist in his subject and in his work; to listen languidly to Nùlma's light chatter, which somehow, in spite of its limitations and its frivolity, seemed to give hints of poetic subtleties; or else to catch the ball of talk herself in a fit of brilliant

exasperation, and dazzle, perplex, and fascinate the girl by her clever paradoxes and soft cynicisms, or to vary things by appeals to Kenward. Did he remember this or that? and wouldn't Nülmá have enjoyed such a thing? and how certain it was that at such and such a point of sympathy Young Australia and Old England would meet! There was always, even in the more personal talk with Kenward, a vague reference to Nülmá, so that the little ignoramus could never feel quite left out in the cold, and could only admire and be grateful for her hostess's tact and consideration. Yet Lady Arthur managed to convey clearly enough to Nülmá that she was an ignoramus, and had no place in her own or Kenward's world. But for this occasional sword-play, Lady Arthur could hardly have borne those hours; and, indeed, sometimes she did not bear them, but would abruptly leave the room on some pretext or other, and have out alone her storm of jealous passion.

After all, however, the hours of torture were not so many. The sittings had to be snatched in the intervals of the Chief Justice's duties: two or three mornings or afternoons running, perhaps, and then with a week or more between, when he was obliged to be absent on official business. It was wonderful, though, what progress would be made in a few hours' work, once the important matters of dress and position were decided.

He had settled, after all, upon a very simple

white frock, and she was to hold a bunch of freshly-gathered wattle in her hands. The wattle was to be added in August. For the present the hands and waist were a blur. But the face was Nùlma's—Nùlma, with the fawn-like eyes, the ripe, bunyan-nut hair, and the fearless yet startled look. It was not a great work of art, but it was a bold, vivid sketch, and, somehow, Kenward had caught in the expression he put into Nùlma's face something which a great outside artist might not have found there, something strange, resolute, ungirlish, almost tragic—the potentialities, as it were, of Nùlma.

"I don't think I'm quite like that," said Nùlma herself one day, when, descending from her platform, she inspected the picture.

He had given her a rest. They were alone for the moment. Lord Arthur had come in, and had called away his wife, telling her that the Governor wished to consult her about something.

"Is there anything you don't like?" Kenward asked anxiously, getting up and standing a little way back from the picture. "I wish you'd tell me, for I could alter it, perhaps. But your father seemed quite satisfied yesterday."

For there had been a meeting of the Executive the day before, and at its conclusion the Governor had detained both the Premier and the Minister of Mines, and had brought them in to inspect the work. Mr. Goodeve had been requested to make allowances on the score of incompleteness, but the

warnings were quite unnecessary. As an art critic, James Goodeve frankly owned that he was out of it; but he knew a likeness when he saw one, and was enraptured with this of Nùlma. He had warmly pressed the artist's hand, and, contrary to his usage, had invited him to come out on Saturday or Sunday to the Bunyas, and stop without ceremony to dinner. Needless to say that Kenward accepted the invitation.

"Oh, I wouldn't for the whole world have it altered!" cried Nùlma; "it's far too pretty. That's the fault, I suppose. But if daddy is pleased, it's a good sort of fault, Mr. Kenward."

"I wish you'd tell me where it is you don't think it quite like you."

Nùlma looked long at the picture before she answered. So did Kenward, and from the picture he looked to Nùlma.

"I think," she said at last, "that you have put more into my face than there really is in it—something like what you have put into Lady Arthur's picture; though it's all right there. She has a history, and I have none. You have made me look as if I were a girl in a story—as if any sort of wonderful thing might happen to me."

"Well, isn't that true? Any sort of wonderful thing might happen to you."

"Do you think so—out here in Leichardt's Land?"

"The human drama fortunately, or unfortunate-

ly, does not confine itself to one particular locality. It's much the same all the world over."

Nùlma examined the picture again, going close to it, and peering impartially into the painted surface, as if she were searching for the clue to a mystery. After that she went to a mirror placed above a table between two windows, as the fashion used to be, and examined herself with equal impartiality.

"Oh yes!" she cried; "you have put your idea into the picture; I told you so. But I can't see the least bit of all that in my face here."

He came nearer her and, invisible to her in the glass, looked at her reflection.

"It's written in every line of it. There, Miss Nùlma—there's no use in your pretending to be commonplace. I venture to prophesy that sooner or later you'll contribute some pretty harrowing scenes to the human drama—not harrowing to yourself, I hope, but probably so to others."

"The human drama," she repeated, and her laugh had a note of embarrassment. "Please don't take me out of my depth, Mr. Kenward. It makes one think, somehow, of the great tragedies and things one of my governesses tried to teach me about; but she had to give it up, because I would muddle up the names with Blacks' language. It seems such an awfully grand expression to apply to me, and daddy, and—"

"And?" he questioned.

"I can't think of anyone else who has anything

much to do with my life, unless it's Mr. Van Vechten."

An unreasonable spasm of jealousy seized Kenward. He always winced under these allusions of Nùlma's to the man whom it was reported she would eventually marry, though he would not admit even to himself that they vexed him. Now he could not blind himself to the fact that this speech of hers had made him angry.

"Why do you always couple yourself like that with Mr. Van Vechten?" he exclaimed. "Is there no other man in the world but Mr. Van Vechten?"

"He's the only man friend I've got," said Nùlma—"the only one daddy ever asks to the Bunyas."

"Your father has asked *me* to the Bunyas," said Kenward. "Did you not hear him yesterday? I felt immensely honoured and grateful, and I am coming. Then, Mr. Van Vechten will not be the only one; you'll have to count me too, I hope, as your friend."

He came a little closer to her shoulder, and now she could see his face behind her in the glass. All the time he had been watching hers. Suddenly she became aware of this, and as he spoke her girlish unconsciousness completely left her. She flushed deeply. The same thought swept over both. Already she was beginning to realize his prophetic portrait of her; there was something in her face which had never before been there. The two pairs

of eyes met in that curious double way in the mirror. The look in hers stirred in him remorse, terror, and a fearful, tingling delight. Her eyes seemed to say to him, "I am the soul that you are awaking to life;" and with the almost horrible sense of responsibility he felt also something of the creator's joy—something of what Pygmalion might have felt as he beheld the marble becoming flesh.

The sound of Lady Arthur's voice coming from the veranda outside the Governor's room recalled him to himself. The voice died away, and he supposed she had re-entered, and was not coming back to them just yet. Well, that interlude had taught him that he must be careful; that he must finish the portrait quickly, and get engrossed in his real work, which happily was coming on now; and that he must not allow himself to think too long of girlish flesh-tints, of shy brown eyes, of maiden curves and dimples, and of that fresh, fearless, unconscious charm which was quite unlike any other charm that had ever been brought to bear upon his, perhaps, too susceptible artistic temperament.

He turned resolutely from the image in the glass, the eyes of which held him as by a spell, walked to the easel, where he altered the height of the canvas a little, and squeezed some more rose madder upon his palette. Then he came back to her. She had turned from the mirror too, and was watching him, still with that embarrassed flush, and that dewy, eager look in her eyes.

"Nùlma," he said, "I'm not grudging Mr. Van Vechten his privileges—no, not in the least. I am sure he is well worthy of them—much more so than I should be; but, still, I should like to have a little privilege on my own account, being a selfish sort of beggar, you know, especially now that I've really been asked to the Bunyas, and got accepted by your father as a fit and proper sort of person to be admitted into his family circle. I know he doesn't admit everyone. I want you to call me your friend too. Will you be my friend, Nùlma?"

Nùlma impulsively put out her little brown hand. There was something childishly pathetic in the look from her wide-open brown eyes which accompanied the gesture. He took her hand in his and held it while she spoke.

"I'm only a stupid Australian girl, Mr. Kenward, and daddy and I seem different, somehow—different from all of you. Oh yes, I know," she went on impatiently; "I felt it that first night we dined here, and I said to myself then that perhaps it would be better if we kept in our own place, and if I put away all the longings that I've always had to be with people like the people in stories—like what you've been making me out to be;" and Nùlma gave her trembling little laugh which was so sweet and so soft; how was it, Kenward thought, that she had no trace of James Goodeve's rough colonial accent? "But everybody has been so kind

—the Governor and Lady Arthur and all of you. I've forgotten what I thought then. Of course I'll be your friend, Mr. Kenward; but it seems absurd to ask me, and it would be more to the point if I were to beg you to be mine. What good could I be as a friend to you?"

"Every good, Nùlma."

"And, then, a friend means a friend—really—to me," Nùlma went on. "You see, I've got so few—besides daddy, of course. Only Luce Perryman and Uncle Van. I can't count Mr. Latham, you know, though he's my godfather. A Premier can't be the friend of a little girl."

"But a Chief Justice can."

"Oh, and a Chief Justice is a greater person really, or quite as great. Now you see what an honour you are doing me. But you'd be so different. The others don't seem able to tell me about the things I want to know, or to teach me the things I want to learn."

"And what are they, my child?"

"Oh, haven't you found out yet? England and books, and people, like Lady Arthur—like you."

He winced again, this time at her unconscious coupling of himself and Lady Arthur, which at the moment jarred upon him inexpressibly. The realization that it did so was a new warning. He dropped her hand, resisting the sudden impulse which had come over him a few moments before to raise it to his lips.

"Thank you, Nùlma; you don't mind my saying that just once in a way—on a solemn occasion like this. You're such a child."

"Oh no! Please call me Nùlma. It doesn't seem natural to be Miss Goodeve. Everybody calls me Nùlma."

"Well, you'll have to get accustomed to being Miss Goodeve, and to standing on your dignity, after the May ball, mustn't you? For it wouldn't do for all the young gentlemen who prowl about Victoria Street to be calling you Nùlma, would it? I'm your friend, though, and so I may call you Nùlma once in a way—not too often. That's settled, then. You're going to do me an immense deal of good, my little friend; you are going to teach me how to avoid rubbing against Australian prejudices: for I want to be a success as the Chief Justice of Leichardt's Land, and not a failure. Also you will instruct me in so much of the Blacks' vocabulary as will be of use to me in my official journeys. And I, in my turn, will instruct you upon various English matters, which probably you would be far better ignorant of; for a little knowledge is a dangerous thing, Nùlma, and is apt to make the young self-conscious—a sad pity in you."

"Oh no, I'll try not to get self-conscious!"

"Well, we must see. Perhaps I shall help Mrs. Perryman to correct your spelling, by telling you of your mistakes when you honour me with an occa-

sional note. I believe you can spell a great deal better than I can."

"Oh no, indeed! I never can manage the dictionary words, and the presenting compliments, and all that in the right place, which Mrs. Perryman says should go into formal notes."

"Stuff! Don't present your compliments to me, please—that I implore. If you do, I'll cease to be your friend. And perhaps, if you liked, I'd tell you some day something about the Greek tragedies and 'things' as you call them, that might make them seem a little more interesting, and not quite so much like Blacks' language. Remember, that is one immense point of superiority you possess over me, and over all the Oxford dons that ever were. *You* can speak Blacks' language. Oh, there'll be a great deal of mutual accommodation in our friendship! And it's a bargain, isn't it, Nùlma?"

He took her hand of his own accord a second time, and this time he did, in spite of all previous resolves, press it lightly and playfully to his lips. Nùlma flushed again. Ah! she had not blushed when Caspar Van Vechten kissed her hand after their particular compact, which was much odder and more personal and embarrassing than this one.

Lady Arthur, coming round by the veranda from the Governor's room, where he had been keeping her in interminable consultation with Captain Textor and Lord Arthur about some structural arrangements for the Birthday ball, caught the

scene between the painter and his model. "Already!" The poor woman gasped the word. She felt her doom approaching. A sensation of deadly sickness came over her, and her heart thumped so that she seemed to hear it above all the other sounds round.

She clutched the iron pillar of the veranda and steadied herself by it, subduing the mad longing she had to rush in and openly upbraid Kenward for his perfidy. Then, with a start of terror, she became aware that her husband was watching her.

"Margot, what is the matter? Are you ill?" He had run to her side.

"No—it's nothing—don't mind——"

"Yes, it is something; you are ill. What upset you?"

"I don't know—oh yes! Do tell them to cut down that datura-tree—you know I can't stand strong scents."

"I'll have it down at once. But it was more than that. Margot, you must come upstairs and lie down. No, I can't have you going in there any more; you must come and lie down."

He led her upstairs, supporting her, and put her on the sofa, and called Maling, and dosed her with sal volatile, brandy—any restorative that he could lay hand on. She got rid of him at last, and then, as soon as the door of the private secretary's room had closed upon him, she darted up, ran down the stairs and into the studio again.

Kenward was saying to Nùlma in quite a matter-of-fact tone, and as though there had been no such thing as a sentimental passage between them:

"Now, Miss Goodeve, we've behaved atrociously, and have wasted a hideous lot of time this morning; but, still, I'm going to be merciful, and I shall give you a ten minutes' rest—not a second more—for this is the last sitting we shall have for a good bit. I've got to begin judicial work again to-morrow, and give my mind to more serious matters."

After all, what had he done? Only kissed a girl's hand in a half-bantering fashion.

Many men had kissed her own hand, some with an old-fashioned gallantry; others because they were half-foreigners, and it was their way; others, again, because they were in love with her. Which reason had it been with Outram Kenward? Impossible that he could be in love with Nùlma already; he looked upon her as a child. So Margot answered herself.

CHAPTER XI.

THE BIRTHDAY BALL.

IT was about a fortnight after this that the great night came—the night of the Birthday ball, which rumour said was to outreach all other Birthday balls that had been in the Randals' reign. Captain Textor had taken immense pains, so had the curator of the Botanical Gardens. The decorations, it was said, were to be quite extraordinary. The scrubs along the river had been ransacked for stag-horn ferns; so had the Observatory and the Marine Department generally, for flags; and there had been a special importation of Chinese lanterns. It was to be a very grand affair.

Nùlma thought the place looked very like fairy-land as she and her father drove in the enclosed jingle between the sentries at the entrance gates. The curving gravel road from the lodge was festooned with lanterns, which hung, too, from a great ficus-tree standing back among the young bamboos and shrubs. All the smaller trees were loaded with coloured lamps, and they outlined the arcades of

the stone veranda, while the little beds on the lawn were all traced with fairy-lights, which made a jewel-like pattern upon the sward. There was a three-quarter moon, which seemed to enhance instead of marring the brilliancy of the illuminations, showing up the dark pyramidal shapes of the orange-trees and the blossoms on the camellia and azalea shrubs. Within the hall door was a blaze of light and colour. Canvas additions, draped about with flags, had been thrown from the veranda, to serve as ante-rooms and dressing-rooms; joints, canvas, and makeshifts being concealed by stands of azaleas, by palms and tree-ferns. For, as Captain Textor remarked to Lady Arthur, it was the easiest thing possible to produce an effect when poinsettias, azaleas, and camellias were to be had in armfuls, and you had Kew Conservatory without a roof all round you.

The general crowd had not begun to arrive when Nùlma and her father drove up. The Ministers and such of the high officials as had the entrée were received first, and then ranged themselves behind the Governor's party, while the guests of lesser importance made their bows and filed past. It was a grievance to Mrs. Perryman that she was not able to accompany Nùlma, her husband being only the head of a department, and therefore not honoured by a card of entrée. She did not think it becoming that a young girl in her teens should take precedence of a matron who might have been her mother. The Perryman household was not alto-

gether cheerful, in fact, when Nùlma went in, on the way to Government House, to show herself to poor little Luce, now lying on the drawing-room sofa, with just faint hopes held out that she might be able to get up and make an appearance, but not dance, at one of the June "at homes"—Lady Randal had always given two "at homes" in June, and it was supposed that Governor Burnside would follow the precedent. Luce had been crying softly, Mr. Perryman looked worried, and Mrs. Perryman was cross—first because she had no Luce to bring out, and secondly because Miss Orr, the dress-maker, in altering her last year's dress, had made it too scanty. "As if I wasn't thin enough already, that she should want to make me look still more like a skeleton!" wrathfully exclaimed Mrs. Perryman, inspecting her scraggy, ill-jointed proportions in a glass, while Luce from her sofa tried to pull out her mother's draperies and give an effect of amplitude which was not in fact. Nùlma burst upon the scene a radiant vision in white tarlatan—girls wore tarlatan in those days—and carrying a bouquet of white rosebuds and maidenhair fern, which, with its long satin streamers, might have come from Covent Garden.

"Oh, Lulu, how lovely!" cried Luce. "Who gave it you?"

"Mr. Van Vechten, of course," replied Nùlma. "Who else would give me a bouquet? That was always a bargain between us. He was to give me

my bouquet, and I was to give him the first dance."

"Oh, can he dance?" said Luce contemptuously. "I thought you'd have danced the first dance with Captain Textor, or the Chief Justice, or one of that lot." Luce in her private heart considered Mr. Van Vechten a respectable bore, far too old to be welcomed as a lover. "For my part, I'd rather have had Victor Degraves than Mr. Van Vechten," she added.

"Or Malcolm Derrett," said Nùlma scornfully. "Please don't compare Mr. Van Vechten with those two."

"I wasn't. He's old enough to be their father. You don't care for young men, Lulu, because you've never been allowed to go in the way of beaux."

"I don't care for boys, if that's what you mean," returned Nùlma loftily. "And as for beaux—that sort of thing is vulgar, common. Fancy Lady Arthur talking about—beaux!"

"Lady Arthur is a married woman. Oh, I knew how it would be. I knew you'd get spoilt by being made so much of at Government House. You despise all your old friends now. It's we that are vulgar, you meant to say. And me lying here——"

"Oh, you poor little thing!" cried Nùlma, stricken with sorrow, as Luce began to cry. "I forgot you weren't going. How selfish and horrid I am! Never mind, Luce dear; your turn will come.

Dr. Clayton says you'll be all right in June. And, whisper, shall I take any message from you to anyone?"

Mrs. Perryman had gone back to wrestle with her dress, and the younger girls and Mr. Perryman were engaged on the tying up of a buttonhole bouquet. Outside, from the jingle, sounded Mr. Good-eve's voice:

"Nùlma, look sharp! Haven't you done admiring each other yet?"

"Oh, is your father there?" exclaimed Mr. Perryman, and ran out, mindful of the fact that Mr. Goodeve was a Minister, and that, though a neighbour and a familiar friend, a meed of respect was his due.

"I must go," said Nùlma. "Who is it, Luce, and what am I to say?"

"You can tell Malcolm to come and see me," whispered Luce.

"He daren't," cried Nùlma. "He is a coward. How can you, Luce? You knew it was he who threw that orange-peel."

"Hush! don't let mamma know. He didn't mean it. And it was partly my fault, for making him jealous—spiting him about Victor Degraves. Tell him, Lulu."

"Very well. But I can tell you *I* wouldn't see him," said Nùlma. "Now, I mustn't keep daddy. Do you—do you think I look nice?"

"Lovely!" cried Luce. "There never was any-

one so pretty as you, Lulu. And I don't—no, I don't feel envious or jealous one bit."

But poor Luce's voice broke as Nùlma ran away.

The great ordeal of making her entrance, which Nùlma had dreaded, was no ordeal at all, for now she seemed to know all the Government House people quite well, even Captain Textor, who did not to-night put her down as a badly-dressed little provincial. White tarlatan skirts, whether put together by a French dressmaker or by Miss Orr, of Victoria Street, Leichardt's Town, are bound to look right, when they billow round the slender form of a very beautiful young woman.

Nùlma stepped with the grace of a wild fawn, her head erect, her cheeks flushed, and her brown eyes all aglow with the consciousness that she was being admired. Such a lovely young creature did she appear that the old Governor stepped forward and greeted her with quite paternal warmth, not forgetting the joke he always made now about the bonbons, and a sly injunction to Captain Textor to see that there were two packets ready for Miss Nùlma to take home with her. "For I don't believe quite altogether in the sick friend," he said. "I've seen you crunching chocolates, my young lady, as if you liked them very much indeed. And mind, now, you enjoy yourself; and if you don't, tell me, and I'll scold Textor for not arranging things better."

Lady Arthur, too, had her caressing pat and approving word, and Lord Arthur his heavy compliment. All this was very delightful—more so to James Goodeve than even to Nùlma herself. His red face glowed all over with pride and pleasure, and he did not feel shy now of putting out his big hand in its tight white glove to shake that of Mrs. Degraves and the other ladies ranged behind Lady Arthur. Nùlma took up her position at the end of the line, and watched Lady Arthur as she went through her duties—for now the general crowd was beginning to arrive—and Nùlma wondered in her own mind whether she herself could ever attain to the shadow of that finished grace and fascination of manner, and how anyone could look at any other woman when her hostess was there to be looked at.

Lady Arthur was certainly at her best this evening, her magnificent shoulders gleaming above her low yellow satin dress, with diamonds round her throat and in her crinkly hair, her face just slightly touched up with rouge, and the lustre of her eyes heightened. She had had a little respite from her agonies of martyrdom, for the Chief Justice had been chained to his work, and had made an official trip up the coast, so that there had been no sittings for a fortnight. As a matter of fact, he had hardly seen Nùlma since that Sunday when, on the Minister of Mines' invitation, he had gone out to the Bunyas, and had spent a long lazy afternoon and evening lounging about the garden, gathering early

mandarin oranges and Cavendish bananas for Nùl-ma, and being shown all the girl's favourite nooks and haunts and pets—her young wallabi, her tame emu, Van Vechten's Arab, and the wattle plantation where the fresh shoots were spreading, at the end of the blue-green branches.

He had determined not to think of her in the interval, or, since she seemed to be always protruding that charming face of hers between his imagination and the subject upon which it should have been at the moment occupied, to think of her only as an entertaining companion for an April afternoon—a pretty, playful child, whom it was an artistic joy to contemplate, and who was destined in due course to become the mistress of that big house in the bend, with its solitary clump of bamboos, and the wife of Caspar Van Vechten. Under this impression of her, forced strenuously upon his mind, she came upon him as she entered in her grown-up ball-gown, holding her big bouquet, with almost a shock of surprise at her newly-acquired womanliness. His eyes continually wandered to her, from where he stood among a group of gentlemen quite at the end of the sort of semicircle of which Lady Arthur and the Governor were the centre.

Lady Arthur, as she bent forward her graceful form in its yellow draperies, and her small foreign-looking head, with its brilliant piercing eyes and hothouse sort of beauty, seemed always interposing between him and the young girl, quelling wild

fancies and reminding him of the allegiance he had sworn long ago, and which had been renewed when she had offered him his liberty on the deck of the man-of-war. Nùlma met his eyes, and the sad look in them troubled and excited her. She was beginning to know always if Kenward was looking at her; to know, even when in a crowd she could not see him, whether he was near her.

The throng in evening-dress pressed on. The hall was full now. All the people in Leichardt's Town must surely be there. One by one they passed by the Governor and Lady Arthur, and made their greetings. Van Vechten came among the last, and when he had shaken hands with his host and hostess, slipped round beside Nùlma.

"You haven't forgotten that I'm to have the first dance," he whispered, "though I am such a dreadful old fogey. Nùlma, child, do you know that I haven't danced for nearly twenty years? and this is my very first ball in Leichardt's Town?"

"Not really, Uncle Van?"

"Yes, quite really. It is in your honour that I have come out of my shell at last. You'll put up with me if I don't know the figures as well as I might, won't you, Nùlma?"

"Why of course, Uncle Van. Perhaps I shall be nervous, and make mistakes too."

The levée or drawing-room, or whatever it might be called, was over at last. The band in the gallery above struck up. Lady Arthur was carried

off by Mr. Degraves, and the Quadrille of State began to form.

"We won't join that, Nùlma," said Van Vechten; "we'll seek a retired corner if you don't mind, and will have pity on my confusion."

Nùlma took his arm, but already she found herself surrounded by a small bevy of men with programmes, one or two in uniforms, but most with black coats and buttonhole bouquets.

"May I have the pleasure, Miss Goodeve?" from one and then another.

"Oh yes," said Nùlma. And just now another voice interposed, a voice which somehow always thrilled her; it was so different in its clear English enunciation from the voices of all other men she knew.

"Miss Goodeve, you mustn't fill up your programme too rashly. Do allow me for a moment."

The Chief Justice took it from her. Nùlma had hardly realized the use of the programme which dangled at the end of her fan till now. When he returned it, she saw that he had written his initials against two waltzes and a set of lancers.

"Will you let me have these—3, 7, 10?"

"Oh, thank you," said Nùlma.

"Miss Goodeve, that's too bad, to give away so many."

It was the Chief Commissioner of Police who spoke.

"Miss Goodeve, we shall not get our places,"

said Van Vechten. "Blaize, have you a *vis-à-vis*? Come, Nùlma."

And he hurried her off.

"Afterwards, afterwards!" cried Nùlma, nodding to the disappointed partners.

"Nùlma," said Van Vechten, in the interval between the first two figures, "it's very hard to see you carried off by everybody like that. I daren't ask you for a waltz—I'm afraid my dancing powers don't run to that—but you'll sit one out with me, won't you?"

"Why, Uncle Van?" hesitated Nùlma. "But it would be such a pity, wouldn't it, to miss a waltz?"

He laughed at the dejection of her tone. "Of course it would. Never mind, child; if you've got another quadrille left, keep it for me—only if somebody wants it that you don't care to dance with, remember. I don't want to be exacting—and I am to take you in to supper, anyhow; that's all settled. You being a Minister's daughter, must go in to supper with a member of the Upper House. At least, it's all arranged, and you can't get out of it."

"Oh, Uncle Van, I'd rather you took me in to supper than anyone," answered Nùlma.

"And mind, Nùlma, we are to have the same sort of compact about the dances, as—as about something else that you and I know of." His voice shook a little, it seemed to Nùlma, and she wondered why. "You are to come and ask me when-

ever you think you would rather sit out a dance with me than dance it with anyone else who on that particular occasion wants to dance with you. You've only got to intimate your royal wishes, remember. I am always at your service."

"But, Uncle Van, if you should be going to dance with somebody yourself?"

"No; I shall not be going to dance with anyone. I don't mean to ask any lady to dance but you."

"Oh, budgery you, Uncle Van! Now, I do feel proud! and Miss Degraves and all of them will be dying to get you. But isn't it an awful waste of good things to keep yourself like that, only for me?"

"I don't think so, my dear. In the first place, there might be a question about the 'good things,' mightn't there? As long as you think them good, that's all I care for. And in the second—well, Nùlma, to keep myself for you—only for you: the very sound of the words is sweet to me—is just the one thing in the world that it would make me happiest to do."

Nùlma's walk round the ballroom after that first quadrille was a sort of triumphal progress, and was in truth rather a slow progress. Every dancing man who didn't know her already wanted to be introduced to her, and every one who did wanted to put his name down upon her programme with as little delay as possible. The Chief Commissioner of Po-

lice got the next dance, which was a galop. And after came Kenward. He had in the meantime approached Lady Arthur.

"I can't give you anything just yet," she said.
"I haven't finished my duty."

"I know that, and it's why I did not make an effort sooner." He studied his programme. "What do you say to 5, or 6, or 9?"

"You pick out the numbers very carefully. Are you so deeply engaged? And are these just the ones you have been good enough to reserve for me?"

He did not answer a word, but waited.

"I will give you the next dance," she exclaimed recklessly. "After all, what does it matter? I can't be supposed to waltz with one of those dreadful Ministers."

He laughed uneasily.

"Arthur thinks it would be more dignified in me not to waltz at all," she said. "Oh, what a farce it is! It was as much as I could do to keep from shrieking at the solemn mockery of that drawing-room presentation business—Margot Keefe and her social ambitions to come to that! Well, the music will begin presently. You might take me down there to the staircase-end."

"I can't, I am sorry to say—can't dance this, I mean. I am engaged."

"Ah! To Nùlma Goodeve?"

"Yes."

"I congratulate you on making good use of your opportunities. Would you mind letting me look at your programme? it would be a pity if I hit upon another dance which happened to be hers."

He gave it to her. She held it close to her narrowed eyes.

"I don't make out the hieroglyph. I suppose it means 'N. G.' Thanks—7 and 10, I see."

"What may I book myself to you for?"

"Nothing. You may give me your arm across the room, if you please. There, to that place by the staircase. . . . Thanks. Now I won't keep you."

She dismissed him with a bow, and turned pointedly to a good-looking English sugar-planter, whose people she knew something about, and to whom she was now especially gracious. Kenward left her. The sugar-planter did not throw balm upon her wound.

"Our friend the Chief Justice seems decidedly smitten by that pretty girl," he said. "Don't you think so, Lady Arthur? Somehow, I did not fancy youth and innocence, and all that sort of thing, were much in his line."

"Did you not? Why?"

"Oh, well—he's a man who has lived, hasn't he?"

"I don't think you can know a great deal about him," replied Lady Arthur, with a smile which only she herself knew to be ironic. She felt no gratitude

at the moment for this evidence that her own reputation was, so far as the sugar-planter's knowledge of it was concerned, quite immaculate. "It is always the men who 'have lived,' as you say, who adore youth and innocence, and—that sort of thing."

He glanced keenly at her, struck by the note of bitterness which she could not conceal, and it occurred to him that he had said a foolish thing, and that probably Lady Arthur and the Chief Justice had had their tender passages. He remembered hearing that they came out in the same vessel. No doubt she was jealous of this young Australian beauty. She divined his thought as quickly as it passed through his mind, and knew that she had betrayed herself. But she was clever enough to counteract the impression, and, bravely putting on her mask, talked soberly of Kenward: wished that he might marry—though, for her own part, she would have preferred that there had been truth in the rumour which gave him to Miss Glassthwaite, the heiress. Had not Mr. Pallavant—that was the sugar-planter's name—heard of Miss Glassthwaite? His people knew her, Lady Arthur was sure, and Miss Glassthwaite was a friend of her own. It would have been delightful if Nora Glassthwaite had been settled in Leichardt's Land during the Governor's time; and an English wife with good connections and money would do more for Outram Kenward than an unformed little Australian, however pretty she might be. And then Lady Arthur,

in the intervals of her social duties, contrived to attach Mr. Pallavant, and started a new martyrdom, in the vain hope of piquing Kenward's waning affections. For a woman of the world she showed herself singularly elementary in her tactics. But the woman who is genuinely in love, be she never so thoroughly sophisticated, when she deals in the primitive emotions, deals also in primitive methods.

CHAPTER XII.

THE TRIUMPHAL PROGRESS.

THE first ball of every girl is supposed to make an epoch in her life, but this was most especially the case with Nùlma. She had never been so absolutely happy. The evening was an enchanted one. Looking back upon it, she did not think there was one incident she would have had different—one partner whose name she would have omitted from her programme. Yes, perhaps she would have enjoyed the mazurka she gave Malcolm Derrett better had she danced it with Captain Textor, who had also asked her for it; but she had the satisfaction of feeling that she had obeyed Luce's behest, and also that she had administered a sound rating to the young man for his cowardice in not owning up, which no doubt he deserved.

"I shall own up to Luce herself," said young Derrett sulkily. He was a good-looking boy of two-and-twenty, a clerk in the Auditor General's office. "She knows quite well that I did not mean the thing, and that I no more thought of tripping

her—than—— I just wanted Victor Degraves to come a buster; I made sure he was going to dance with the Slade girl, who is a pretty good hand at taking care of herself—in fact, he told me so—and how should I guess that he'd change at the last moment to Luce? Poor little Luce!"

"Well, I'm glad you are sorry for her," said Nùlma. "I know, if I were Luce, I'd have nothing more to say to you." And as they went slowly round, she supposed within herself that this sort of thing was what Luce meant by "having beaux," and decided that Malcolm Derrett as a possession would not appeal to her—Nùlma—in the least, and hoped that, whatever happened to her, she would at least not come to that.

The dance with Malcolm Derrett took place towards the end of the evening, and before it she had had her three dances with the Chief Justice. Perhaps they, in addition to her other experiences that evening, helped to raise Nùlma's standard as regards "beaux." She reflected that Luce was not in the enjoyment of her privileges. Had such a man as Mr. Kenward ever singled Luce out to be his friend, she could never have stooped to Malcolm Derrett.

Kenward danced, as he did most things, well, but he did so with a certain reserve and discretion, and bestowed his favours by no means indiscriminately. Nùlma and Miss Degraves were about the only two young ladies whom he led out, a fact ob-

served and commented upon by the Leichardt's Town matrons. He danced with stately ease, which made his performance seem a very dignified affair compared with the more jerky prancings of the Bushmen and the Leichardt's Town youths. No one had a step like his, unless it were Mr. Pallavant the planter, who confined his attentions mostly to Lady Arthur, though he did twice condescend to Nùlma. The girl had a little difficulty at first in accommodating herself to Kenward's gliding motion, but he supported her so dexterously, and steered her with such skill and strength, that in a minute or two they were in complete accord.

"I ought never to dance with anyone but you," she said breathlessly, "if I am to keep in that step. I shall lose it next dance."

"Oh no, you won't—not if Textor is your partner; he's a splendid dancer. Well, I wish you might never dance with anyone but me, Miss Good-eve, only in that case I should be fighting duels, I expect, and that wouldn't be becoming in a Chief Justice."

Kenward was proud, and took Lady Arthur at her word, not again asking her to dance with him. To her, the evening was one unmitigated pain, though she looked bright enough, played her part bravely, and seemed to be enjoying herself. It was over at last. Nùlma, in her conquering radiance, had departed, followed by limp, draggled Mrs. Perryman and her husband, to whom Mr. Goodeve

had promised a lift home, for it was a great matter to the Perrymans to be saved the price of that return jingle. And Lady Arthur had put on her mask of smiles, and had caressingly asked the girl if she had had a good time.

"Oh, thank you, thank you!" cried Nùlma. "It has been perfect. I *have* enjoyed myself. I shall never forget my first ball."

"Have you arranged for any more sittings?" Lady Arthur asked.

"No; I quite forgot. But I think the picture is nearly finished now—till the wattle comes out. Mr. Kenward is to ride out on Sunday, and I'll ask him then—"

And Lady Arthur turned away smarting with the pain of a dagger-thrust, of which its dealer was quite unconscious.

"Good-night," said Kenward presently. "It has been a wondrous success. Everyone is charmed. You ought to be congratulated. You couldn't feel any doubts now," he added in a lower tone, "about doing the right thing by Leichardt's Town. You are pronounced a model hostess."

He seemed to have forgotten the earlier episode. She answered not a word. Some of the last guests came up with unnecessary fervour to take their leave. There were still a few belated couples. Lady Arthur gave Kenward a look which carried him back two years or more—back to London ball-rooms, to other partings, to tender lingerings when

he had waited to take her downstairs and hand her into her hired brougham, perhaps to slip in after her on the pretence of taking a lift. There swept over him a flood of remorseful recollections.

" You are tired out," he said. " Let me take you into the supper-room and get you some champagne or something."

She accepted his arm, and they passed along the now empty colonnade, where the flowers and ferns were drooping, and some of the flags twisted awry. She stopped suddenly, as though another impulse had seized her.

" No, I won't have anything, thanks. I had better go back; they'll think it odd. Good-night."

" Good-night, then," he answered curtly, and left her. But the next day he got a letter from her—a letter all passionate reproach and tenderness, a letter such as she might have written him in the old days—bidding him go to her. He obeyed the summons. The horses were waiting at the door when he rode up. Everyone rode in Leichardt's Town, and she came down in her habit.

" Will you ride with me?" said she, quite in her usual tone. " Arthur and Captain Textor are going to look at the new race-course. Arthur wants to run Brunette. We can keep by the river, if you like. The race-course doesn't interest me."

So they rode together, turning as soon as might be out of town, and taking the road by the river, which lay like a great blue ribbon, just ruffled into

sparkling wavelets by the west wind that blew across the water, and gave a touch of chill to the air. It was wonderful, that fresh champagny breeze, laden with faint perfumes of winter roses, narcissus and tuberose, and with aromatic whiffs from the gum-forest which spread out on one side of them. It seemed to blow away the rancour and pain, and had a slightly intoxicating effect upon these two sensitive persons, always keenly susceptible to such influences. Lord Arthur and Captain Textor rode ahead, making little détours as the aide-de-camp tried Brunette over fallen logs or paced her over a tiny flat. By-and-by they turned up a side-road towards the race-course, but Lady Arthur, who had watched them out of sight among the thickening gum-trees, deliberately continued in the original direction. They cantered past a little German settlement of Bush huts, set in fields of bananas and pine-apple plantations, but rode slower as they found themselves in a perfectly lonely road, and then both grew confidential.

She never looked so well as in her riding-habit, and the touch of melancholy tenderness and of veiled penitence in her manner made her particularly charming. She was clever enough to say nothing of Nùlma at first, or of the jealous fears which tormented her. She talked to him of himself, of his prospects, of her hopes for him, of the prestige he would gain, and of his return with restored constitution to work out a brilliant career

in England. She spoke plaintively of her own lot, of its loneliness; of Lord Arthur's morose ways, as she called them; of her broken nerves, which made her unreasonable and selfish sometimes; of her love for him, the one ruling passion of her life; of the despairing pain it brought her when she recognised its utter hopelessness.

"There can only be one ending to that kind of thing, Outram," she said. "Do you think I haven't calculated it—that I don't grimly face it every day? And as I see it coming nearer and nearer, I feel like the poor wretches they used to imprison in those shrinking iron chambers, which must in the end crush them slowly to death."

"Margot," said Kenward, "what can I say? What assurances can I give you other than I have already given? Tell me, and I will say or do anything that you wish."

"Give me this assurance, then. It is not a great deal that I ask; but promise me, on your honour, that you will say no decisive words, will ask no girl to marry you, without first telling me frankly of your intention."

"That's a very easy assurance to give. I promise that, in such an event—which is not at all likely to take place—I will give you full and fair warning."

"Thank you. Remember, it is a promise—on your honour, Outram," she said, after a pause. "You hurt me last night—horribly."

He did not pretend to ignore her meaning.

"I think you were unreasonable."

"Probably. Have I not said that I am often unreasonable? But it was the first time since I have known you that a woman stood between me and you."

"A woman? A child!"

"Tell me honestly," she went on. "Don't be afraid of hurting me. Have you ever thought of Nùlma Goodeve as your wife?"

"Honestly, I have not. Such a marriage, putting everything else aside, would be detrimental to my interests."

"More detrimental even than—such a bond as ours has been! I don't know. She is very lovely. No one in England would know that she was the daughter of a bullock-driver. I suppose she has money—or will have money. On the whole, I don't know why she shouldn't do as well as Nora Glass-thwaite."

"You seem to forget, putting other things aside, as I said, that she is engaged, or half engaged, to Van Vechten."

"Is she? Pray, who has made you certain of that fact?"

"She herself. There's a sort of understanding between them, which practically amounts to an engagement. Margot, will you do me a favour? Dismiss that subject once and for ever."

"Dismiss Nùlma Goodeve? That would be dif-

ficult. She has a way of taking the centre of the stage."

"Unconsciously."

"Oh, unconsciously, I grant you, at present. By-and-by she will discover for herself that she has in her the elements of drama. No doubt, if you do not teach her, some other obliging and infatuated man will."

Kenward gave a laugh which puzzled Lady Arthur. She did not ask an explanation, however, and he did not volunteer one.

All Leichardt's Town agreed that this was the gayest winter that had been known since the colony had been endowed with a Governor, and placed in a position to establish social precedents. The Birthday ball was only the beginning of a series of gaieties. The Ubi Downs Show next took place, the postponement of which had almost made the Government House people unpopular, and fashionable and Ministerial Leichardt's Town departed for those days to that favoured district, where sundry hospitalities were dispensed by the important squatters, and where there were some balls and various daylight gala doings.

Nülma Goodeve's intimacy at Government House caused her to be included in these festivities, in which she might not otherwise have taken part. The Minister of Mines went up, as a matter of course, his daughter accompanying him. They stayed with one of the squatters—it happened to

be the house in which the Chief Justice was also quartered—and had an extremely good time generally. Nùlma had entirely got over her little fit of depression, and her inclination to fancy that the world was making sport of her and of her father's antecedents. Life to her just now was like a chapter out of one of her most interesting novels, or a perpetual waltz to soul-thrilling music, a waltz with Outram Kenward—that was what the highest ideal of enjoyment came to.

She had many waltzes with him. By this time she had learned his step to perfection, and he declared that there had never been even an English girl so delightful to him as a partner. But even as he made the declaration he had felt a little stab of conscience, remembering certain London dances, and a very particular hunt ball to which he and Lady Arthur Keefe had gone as fellow-guests from the same country-house. He had compounded with conscience, however, on the score that Margot Keefe had never been a girl for him, and that she was not English. Besides which, there was never any suggestion of, or approach to, love-making in his comradeship with Nùlma. He took almost more pains than were quite necessary to make it clear to himself, and to her, that he was not a marrying man; that Nùlma was to him but a beautiful child—a dear little friend, a sort of sister. Moreover, that he was very nearly twenty years older than she; though he could hardly count this a bar,

in the face of the fact which he strenuously maintained to himself, that she was almost, if not quite, engaged to Van Vechten.

Under all these conditions, the thoughts of Lady Arthur, of her possible ground for jealousy, did not greatly disturb him. There were many opportunities also on which he might enjoy Nulma's society without danger of causing Lady Arthur uneasiness. According to colonial etiquette, the Government House ladies did not mix with the ordinary herd, and were not in a general way invited to Leichardt's Town parties. Only when important people like the President of the Legislative Council, the Premier, and other such dignitaries, gave a very grand entertainment, Lord and Lady Arthur attended it in a sort of semi-state, and as representing the Governor, who declared himself too old for gaieties outside those of Government House and the public balls he was bound to patronize. Occasionally also Lady Arthur paid informal visits to certain people who lived out of town, and had called at the Bunyas, upon the Degraves, and had taken afternoon tea with Mr. Van Vechten, that she might see the view of the river and town from the Bamboo Hill. But she did not go to any of the ordinary balls and dances, and so, being somewhat out of the run of Leichardt's Town gossip, was not aware how many the Chief Justice attended. Captain Textor was a discreet person, and possibly scented the situation, so that the report current in Leich-

ardt's Town circles, that the Chief Justice was madly in love with Nùlma Goodeve, and that the Van Vechten marriage was not likely to come off, did not penetrate within the gates of Government House. Alas for Lady Arthur, however! there were many occasions, public and private, when the attraction of Outram Kenward towards the young Australian girl seemed sufficiently evident.

Nùlma was intensely happy, and she was so gay and so absorbed in her gaieties that she never stopped to think. The clear winter air was like champagne to her. She seemed to be treading on elastic—to be living in a sort of elysium, where all sounds were melody, and life altogether a pæan of rejoicing.

There was a little Parliamentary crisis going on, and her father was obliged to leave her almost entirely to herself. Out of the session it was Mr. Goodeve's habit to spend most of his time after office hours with his daughter, but now that the House was sitting he seldom got home till late in the evening. Van Vechten, too, being a member of Council, though less onerously burdened, had his afternoons taken up, and it came about that Sunday was almost the only day that Nùlma was certain to see him. They did not meet at the dances, to which Mrs. Perryman usually chaperoned her, as often as Nùlma met Kenward, for Van Vechten was known not to be a dancing man, and his long retirement made people shy of asking him. Perhaps also there was

design in his abstention from Nùlma's society. He had laid out his part for himself: he would be there, always ready to come forward in her service at the slightest signal from her. When she made no signal, and seemed, as now, to be enjoying herself, going on her conquering way happy without him, he would hold back and bide his opportunity.

Thus it came about that the most prominent person in Nùlma's little world just then was Kenward. She realized this when the assizes came on, and when for a short time she saw almost nothing of him. Fortunately, the criminal statistics of Leichardt's Land were low this year—a murder by a black fellow, under circumstances which made pity for the perpetrator, or doubt as to the justice of the penalty, impossible, being the most harrowing. When the assizes were over, the Chief Justice gave himself a holiday in more senses than one. Then he saw a great deal of Nùlma.

Already there had come off that visit to his "diggings" which he had suggested to Nùlma. Indeed, the "diggings" had been the scene of two informal bachelor entertainments. On the first occasion, all the Government House party which Nùlma had been invited to join, including the old Governor himself, had ridden out to Minyando, the Chief Justice's new house, only then it had not had its name changed from that of Mount Stuart, bestowed by the original occupant. This entertainment had necessarily been a little more elaborate

than one which took place later; and the gems of modern art, about which Kenward had spoken to Nùlma, and which Lady Arthur knew very well already, had not been brought greatly into evidence. The garden, the stables, and the furniture supplied by a Leichardt's Town firm, had been the main points of interest. The Governor, who had a turn for horticulture, and was fond of comparing the tropical products of Leichardt's Land with those of Farnesia, had exhaustively examined the flower-beds; and then they had sipped tea out of Dresden cups—Kenward's extravagance—in the veranda; had all talked more or less generally, Nùlma contributing least to the conversation; and had ridden back in the dusk, Nùlma taking leave of the rest at the gate of the Bunyas.

However, a fortnight or so later there had been a second tea in the veranda, at which Lady Arthur had not assisted. She had been invited, but perhaps the Chief Justice had known previously that upon this day she was bound to entertain at Government House the wife and sister of that squatter who had acted as entertainer to the Governor during the Ubi Down Show. Lady Arthur had supposed that the Chief Justice would postpone his tea-party. But he had not done so.

Nùlma and her father were the only guests, and the saying had been reversed of "the more, the merrier," for in this case the tiny party made much more merriment than the larger one had done.

Nùlma, unoppressed by the influence of elders and superiors, had laughed and chattered like a veritable child of Nature. The mandarin oranges were ripe, and she had gathered and eaten, making the air pungent with aromatic odours as the peel squirted out its essence. Blacks' language had flowed unrebuked, for Kenward had encouraged it, and had gravely requested her to search the vocabulary for a native name more appropriate to the locality than Mount Stuart. Tea had been drunk in the veranda, the drawing-room inspected again, and the pictures, ivories, and odds and ends which Kenward—a collector in an unostentatious fashion—had brought out with him, were exhibited. Finally, the place had been rechristened, and, Kenward solemnly declared, should be known henceforward and for ever as Min-yando.

It was July now, and a good deal had happened. There had been the “at homes” at Government House. The Degraves had given a large party, and there had been a less pretentious dance at Wirrib in honour of Luce's recovery, for, in spite of all melancholy prognostications, Luce was herself again, the strain upon the Perrymans' finances in the shape of Dr. Clayton's fees had been removed, and the rivalry between Malcolm Derrett and Victor Degraves was in full swing. Besides these, there had been many more dances, and there had been riding-parties, picnics, and excursions to the bay in the Government steamer, all calculated to advance the

little drama that was being played out. Now there was a great talk being made about a bachelors' ball, which the Chief Justice had been mainly instrumental in getting up, and which was to take place in the newly-erected School of Arts.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE SPRIG OF WATTLE.

MR. GOODEVE was late in getting back from the House that evening. Though the ball had been fixed purposely for a Wednesday, when the Legislative Assembly only sat in the morning, there had been obstructional tactics on the part of the Opposition, and the standing orders had been suspended. A general row had been a consequence, and nothing but the fact that most of the bachelors giving the ball belonged to the Legislative Assembly would have caused the House to be adjourned at all. Nùlma was waiting impatiently, pacing the drawing-room. She was dressed, according to a suggestion of Kenward's, in pale yellow, with a sash the colour of her hair, and a fan and bouquet in which browns and yellow were artfully mingled.

"By George, we're going it to-night!" exclaimed Mr. Goodeve, proudly surveying his daughter. "We *are* flash, my word! It's a queer sort of frock, isn't it, Lulu? Whose idea was that? Rather like a tin of Colman's mustard, eh?"

"Oh, daddy, you are not artistic! It was Mr. Kenward's," added Nùlma demurely. "He said once he'd like to see me dressed in colours like these, and it was he who thought out the whole thing. Budgery—eh, dad?"

"Budgery is not the word. And, I say, Lulu, you'll have to drop that 'budgery' of yours, now you're going about among grand English people. It won't do for them to be calling you the little savage."

"It amuses the Governor, dad. They're always asking me to talk Black. Oh, *do* be quick and dress! The ball will have begun before we leave here."

Nùlma's cheeks were fretted to the real tint of a sun-flushed apricot. In fact, Kenward had ere this conceived the notion of another study of her, to be called "The Apricot Girl." As he saw her come up the ballroom, he murmured to himself involuntarily: "Heavens! how lovely she is!" Her brown eyes, flashing eagerly under the finely-accentuated brows and sweep of lash; her thin little nose, perked forward in a sort of wondering joy; her half-parted lips; the backward throw of her head, with its yellow-brown waves of hair; and the upturned curves of her babyish yet decisive chin, all gave her a singularly radiant and triumphant air—the air of one intoxicated with youth and hope, at whose feet lay the world and the glory thereof.

This impression struck poignantly upon Margot Keefe. From her position on the daïs at one end

of the long School of Arts, where the ball was held, she could very well judge of the sensation caused by Nühma's entrance. Just below her stood Van Vechten, who advanced with deliberate eagerness, and not far from him, in the act of descending the two or three steps from the daïs, was Kenward. The Chief Justice's sudden halt, as the murmured words of admiration framed themselves, was eloquent to Margot, and caused her a sickening pain.

"He is in love with her," the poor woman said to herself. "If she wanted to make him propose to her, he'd do it to-night. But he's got to keep his promise, he's got to keep his promise," she went on mentally ejaculating. "I wonder if he'll remember." She laughed under her breath—a bitter little laugh. "If he does remember, and keeps it, that will show she is not all-powerful yet."

"This is our dance, I believe, Lady Arthur," said the planter, Mr. Pallavant, at her elbow; and she got up and went down with him into the hall, where she saw Kenward with Nulma on his arm.

Both Van Vechten and the Chief Justice wore the white badges and red camellia buds which marked them out as hosts. They were, indeed, the most important of the bachelors who were giving the ball. Kenward had opened it with Lady Arthur, and it was then that the passion of anger which had been smouldering for weeks blazed up as she noticed his preoccupied manner and the anxious looks he kept continually casting towards

the entrance. She knew that he was uneasy because Nùlma had not arrived.

"Pray compose yourself," she said at last. "It is not likely that there has been an accident. Perhaps the Minister of Mines was late. I noticed that the windows of the Parliamentary buildings were lighted as we drove by."

"Oh yes; they are squabbling over the Land Bill," he answered, with an effort to seem unconscious of her rasping tone, which emphasized the allusion; but his eyes gleamed sullenly.

"No; it is the Bill for Supply," she returned. "You betray your agitation. That is neither dignified nor complimentary to me."

"What is it that you mean, Margot? This is unworthy of you."

"Don't call me Margot! How dare you? how dare you?"

Her words came in a whisper, but their intensity made them venomous. She moved forward to take her place in the figure. When she faced him again, her lips were set in a smile.

"Do you remember the Bourdillons' dance?" she asked. "This night three years ago. The coincidence of dates seems appropriate, doesn't it?"

"It had not occurred to me. You have a good memory."

"A woman generally has—for those things. Your flower reminded me. I had a bouquet of pink camellias—do you remember?"

"Yes, I remember."

"You made me give you a bud. Do you remember that, too? You were going to keep it till your dying day. Those were your words. . . . It is your turn, I think. . . . We're both a long way off dying, more's the pity—for me, at any rate. Have you asked Miss Goodeve to give you a flower yet to keep till your dying day? But you wouldn't talk such melodramatic trash now."

He muttered something almost inaudible about "cruelty," and she glided languidly to meet her *vis-à-vis*. Then came the pause again. She went on, in the same bitter undertone, always with a smile.

"It's to be a sprig of wattle, isn't it? You won't have long to wait; the buds are thickening. I looked at a shrub in the garden of Government House to-day. Outram, how long did you keep that camellia-bud?"

"I have it now."

"Thank you. The statement does you credit. Perjury, we all know, is a matter of honour on occasions. It would have been foolish to take you literally. Old flowers, old loves—there can be but one end to them—the dust-heap. . . . Don't you see that Mrs. Degraves is chasséeing to you—a real early Victorian *classeé*? How delightful! . . . I beg a hundred pardons"—to a gentleman next her who had hazarded an observation. "No, the Governor never dances. What a good effect the poin-

settias make! The Governor was saying that the poinsettias here are quite equal to those in Farnesia, which is right in the tropics, you know."

And so on through the interminable set. It was after having taken Lady Arthur back to her seat on the daïs that Kenward, descending, saw Nùlma.

They danced the first waltz together. This had been an engagement ever since the bachelors' ball was first talked about, and Nùlma had fretted herself into a fever lest she should be late for it. She had looked forward to this waltz with an almost fearful hope. It had begun to dawn upon her lately that she was something more than a plaything to the Chief Justice. To her—she owned it now fearlessly to herself—he was the king of men.

The waltz was a disappointment. She had expected to see a smile of delighted approval upon his face. Her dress had been *his* thought, and she had pranked herself out entirely to win his approval. But he paid her no compliment; his face seemed grim, cold, and pained; the few remarks he made were mechanical. What had she done to offend him? Tears filled her eyes; he felt her step falter.

"Are you tired? Shall we stop?" he asked.

"No; please go on." It was better to dance than to run the risk of betraying herself.

They paused presently, and he drew back with her a little, but not out of the way of the crowd.

"You have carried out the idea well," he said

slowly, looking down at her dress. " You look—just as I expected."

" I was afraid you didn't like it; I'm glad you think it's nice."

He gave a queer moved little laugh.

" It is perfect. You are a dream. I shall always think of you as I see you now—when I think of you in times to come, and we are far apart from each other."

His words seemed to suggest a leave-taking. She glanced at him with pained bewilderment.

" You are not—going away?"

" There are other kinds of apartness than that which distance makes. Nùlma, are you rested? Shall we go on again?"

He put his arm round her waist, and they finished the dance. Instead of taking her, as she had hoped, along a palm-lined corridor which led to a sort of sitting-out room, he walked with her twice round the hall in the ring of promenaders, and then asked her if she would like to go on the daïs. Van Vechten intervened as they were about to mount the steps.

" The next is my dance, Nùlma;" and Kenward bowed and withdrew. Just then other young gentlemen came up, begging for dances, and Nùlma remembered that Kenward had not put his name down upon her programme, and wondered if he did not mean to ask her again. She had never yet been with him at a dance when he had not taken

at least three waltzes. She looked at her card in sickening perplexity. There were only two waltzes left, and these were very low down.

"May I see your card, Nùlma?" said Van Vechten when they had found a seat. He examined the hieroglyphs. The Chief Justice's initials, he saw, were not among them, and there were the two blank spaces. "May I have these?" he asked.

She hesitated.

"Yes; and—Uncle Van, if I should want them you won't mind."

His lips twitched and the heart within him felt sore.

"I told you, my dear, long ago to make use of me in that way as in any other," he answered.

"Oh, Uncle Van, how good you are!" The girl's eyes were brimming.

"What's the matter, child? Are you not enjoying yourself? Has anything gone wrong?"

"Everything has gone wrong!" exclaimed Nùlma impetuously. "I thought I was going to be so happy, and I've done something—I don't know what. It's all different."

"Different from what you expected. Poor little Nùlma! Can you tell me how, my dear?"

The girl flushed deeply.

"No, Uncle Van; don't ask me. Never mind. Let us go back and see the people dancing. It—it's dull sitting here."

Kenward was waltzing with Miss Degraves. Luce Perryman whirled by radiant in the arms of Malcolm Derrett. Lady Arthur glided gracefully round, piloted by Mr. Pallavant. She stopped before Nùlma when the dance was over.

"Come and sit beside me, child; I have not seen you for a week. I want to know what you have been doing. Bring her up to the Governor, Mr. Van Vechten; he wants to look at her dress."

All the important people—the Ministers' wives, the squatters' wives, the wives of the heads of departments even—sat on the daïs. Mrs. Perryman was there, and beckoned to Nùlma; and Mrs. Degraves gave her a smile and nod. But Lady Arthur, breaking from her escort, put her hand within the girl's arm, and led her to the Governor and her husband, who were standing talking to the Minister of Mines. He all the time had been absently watching Nùlma.

"Isn't she delicious—a sweet little ripe apricot growing on a wattle-bough! Doesn't she do credit to her designer?" said Lady Arthur.

"And who is that?" asked the Governor. "What's the Black for 'perfectly charming,' Miss Nùlma?"

"Cobbon budgery," promptly quoted Nùlma.

"The Chief Justice designed her," said Lady Arthur. "I know his scheme of colouring."

Something in her tone struck her husband. He

looked at her keenly from under his thick, fair lashes.

“ Did he design ball-dresses for you?”

“ Many times—when you were in India. He designed them for Miss Glassthwaite, too, though that is natural enough. Nùlma, sit here. Tell me, shall you be at home to-morrow afternoon?”

“ Yes—why, of course, if you want me to be, Lady Arthur.”

“ I want you to be at home because I am going to ride out, and because I want to have a quiet chat with you. I’ve something to tell you—a warning to give,” she added in a lower tone.

“ A warning!” repeated Nùlma.

“ Yes, my dear little unsophisticated Australian—a warning against sophisticated men of the world. Now you are going to be carried off. How many dances have you given to Mr. Kenward this evening?”

“ He has not asked me for any, except the first waltz; and I had been engaged to him for that long before,” answered Nùlma.

But Kenward came deliberately towards her a dance or two later.

“ Miss Goodeve, may I have the honour of dancing another waltz with you?” She held out her programme to him with a reproachful shake of her head. “ Filled up! I might have expected that, and I’m afraid I deserve it for not having secured you sooner. But one has duties this evening,” he

added indistinctly. "I must throw myself on your mercy. Is there really nothing that you can give me?"

She pointed to one of those against which "C. V. V." were written.

"I don't think Mr. Van Vechten would mind."

"I'm afraid I can't quite believe that; but I will take them both thankfully." He handed her back the programme, having scribbled his initials over the others, and his eyes met hers with a fierce, troubled look, that thrilled and made her happy once more. "You are very sweet and true. Forgive me, Nülma," he murmured.

Oh yes, he was forgiven. It would have needed worse wrong than that to make her implacable towards him. And yet the child's pride was wounded—her heart was bitter. He should see that she was not a mere toy—that she was something more than a sprig of wild wattle, to be plucked and thrown aside.

She was very silent during the waltz. No, she did not want to rest; she was not tired—not the least bit—she could dance on all night. And when it was over, she did not want, either, to sit down, and she thought Uncle Van, who was to take her in to supper, would be waiting for her; and so would Mr. Kenward take her back, please, to daddy or Mrs. Perryman?

The second waltz was three lower. Some of the elder people had gone, the Governor among

them. Captain Textor had gone with him. Lord Arthur remained with Lady Arthur, for whom the carriage was to return. She was dancing more than usual to-night.

It happened after supper. Perhaps that had something to do with the sudden impulse that overcame the Chief Justice. An hour before he had believed himself firmly steeled in the resolve that Nùlma should never know he loved her. He had been tempted, but he had repelled temptation. For weeks he had been drifting on, not allowing himself to realize his position. To-night, his keen anxiety at her non-appearance, his emotion at the sight of her, and, above all, Lady Arthur's reproaches, had brought it with overwhelming force before him. He told himself that there was but one woman to whom he was in honour bound—"honour rooted in dishonour," he bitterly quoted in his thoughts—but none the less did the shackles of his old love hold him. While she remained at Government House he must put the notion of marriage out of his mind. It was of no use to argue that she had practically released him—that she herself recognised the injustice of chaining him for life to a hopeless passion. It was as vain to assert that the passion was dead, the mad fever over—that she had no right to claim him as her bond-slave any longer. He was her slave, notwithstanding, and he could not be Nùlma's husband.

Ah, but the dream had been sweet! To clasp

that young, fresh, beautiful creature in his arms; to start life anew, rebaptized in the waters of her pure affection; to have the prospect, now as middle age was advancing, of dear interests and responsibilities; of a home gladdened by wife and children —this seemed to him as the vision of an impossible paradise; and the angel at the gate, forbidding, took the shape of a pale, smiling, hothouse-flower woman in yellow and diamonds, with long eyes gleaming between narrowed lids, and parted, crinkly hair—the shape of Margot Keefe.

It seemed to Nùlma, too, that she and Kenward were whirling together in a drama. She had a dim consciousness of Van Vechten's eyes following her sadly, and of something fierce and disquieting in those of Lady Arthur, which she surprised continually as she flew past the daïs. Kenward murmured to her as they waltzed in wild half-sentences, which said little and yet told so much. Before the music stopped, as she hung dizzily upon his arm while they were drawing back through the crowd, he turned abruptly down the palm-decorated passage, and, following it beyond the flag-draped doorway into a sitting-room, brought her on to a veranda, screened by creepers from the roadway, and dimly lighted by one or two Chinese lanterns.

“ Nobody has found this out yet,” he said; “ we have it all to ourselves. Nùlma——”

He uttered her name with a tender inflexion in his voice, and paused, as though he were afraid

of himself. She withdrew her hand from his arm, and stood, her head bent a little over her bouquet, which she held up in her two hands. Her attitude was child-like, yet full of a certain native dignity.

"I have never truly known till now how sweet you are," he exclaimed, and for a moment put his hand upon hers which clasped the bouquet. "If I only dared to say to you what is in my heart."

"Is it so difficult to speak? Why are you afraid?" She laughed, but her voice trembled.

"It would not be difficult, if I could put the clock back ten years, so that I should stand ten years nearer to you. Then I should not be afraid. Now I am afraid, because I am not fit to ask for your love—because I have no right——"

"No," she interrupted, her voice deepened by a girl's innocent passion and wounded pride; "I know it isn't that. It's because you think I have no right to go into your world—because you think *I'm* not fit. I'm only, what you called me, a sprig of Bush wattle, that you like to play with for a little while, and that, when you are tired of it, you can throw away. Oh! I understand very well, Mr. Kenward. I think I've got wiser about some things since I've known you—and Lady Arthur."

Her unconscious coupling of him with the other woman was again to him like the pain of a sting.

"No; you don't understand. How could you

understand? Don't you *know* how high I rate you? Don't you *know* that to accuse me of any such belittling thought of you is unjust, cruel?"

"I did not know. I only know that daddy and I are different, and—and, it doesn't matter."

"It does matter. It matters all the world to me, anyhow, that you should at least do me justice, Nùlma. The truth was forced home upon me when I saw you come into the ballroom this evening, so radiant in your loveliness and your innocent girlhood."

"The truth?"

"That I cannot tell you—that I must not tell you—to-night. But to-morrow——"

"It is already to-morrow," Nùlma answered.
"Listen."

The clock above the School of Arts was ringing out three.

"To-day, then, I will tell you, but not now. This afternoon I'm coming out to the Bunyas. I'm coming to see if the wattle is yet nearly in bloom. This is August 12, child, and the eighteenth is your birthday. On your birthday, you said, the wattle was always out."

Nùlma gave a little shy laugh.

"See, I wanted to show you this before, but you wouldn't let me think you cared. I gathered it to-day."

She held out her bouquet, and, parting the yellow rosebuds and the sprigs of jasmine and orange

azalea of which it was composed, showed buried in the centre a little sprig of fluffy wattle. She drew it half out from its hiding-place.

"Give it to me, Nùlma," he said. "Give it to me in token of something sweeter still, to keep till to-morrow."

Nùlma flushed deeply. She hesitated a moment, then simply held the sprig to him. Her brown eyes met his straightly. Kenward felt that he should never forget that look—it had the utter candour, the pathetic appeal, of a dog's eyes when he looks at his master.

He took the sprig of wattle, and was sentimental enough to touch it with his lips before he transferred it to his breast-pocket. Just then, the rustle of silk which had been intermittently sounding along the corridor, mingling with the distant blare of the band, gave place to a mocking little laugh which Kenward knew; and then a voice, which he knew too, spoke.

"She is here, you see, Mr. Goodeve; if you want to march off with your prey, you shall hand me over to Mr. Kenward, who will see me safe back. Arthur is getting impatient, and the carriage is waiting."

Margot Keefe advanced. Kenward stood motionless as a criminal detected in his crime. Margot's eyes flashed at him for an instant before she addressed the young girl. Nùlma turned to her with that rapt, confiding look still in her brown

eyes. Lady Arthur felt that she could interpret the look.

"We have been hunting for you, my dear. I wanted to ask you, before I go, whether it will suit you as well if I come for luncheon to-morrow, instead of later. Arthur has made some plan with the Governor for us to go and see the new water-works in the afternoon?"

"Why, of course Nülmá will be delighted," put in Mr. Goodeve. "All times are alike to her. I wish I could be at the Bunyas to do the honours, Lady Arthur; but you must take the girlie as she is, and they'll give you something to eat, anyhow. You might ask Mrs. Perryman to come across, Lulu."

"Oh, not for worlds!" interrupted Lady Arthur. "I have the greatest respect for Mrs. Perryman, but it's Nülmá I want to have a chat with. Then, about twelve, for I must get away directly after luncheon."

"Thank you," replied Nülmá mechanically. "Oh yes; that will do beautifully." What did anything matter—up to the afternoon? Her sun would not rise till about five o'clock.

"Lulu," said the Minister of Mines, "you must come along directly. I've lost my beauty-sleep; and I've got to be at the office pretty early to-morrow, and we shall be having an all-night sitting in the House, most likely. Besides, they'll be playing 'God save the Queen' here in a minute or two."

"They won't be so rude as to play it till I've gone," said Lady Arthur. "But it's time for good little girls to be in bed, and for naughty grown women too. Mr. Kenward, do you mind taking me back to the ballroom? I've something I want to say to you before we go."

Kenward bowed without a word.

"Then, good-night, Lady Arthur. I'm sure I'm very much obliged to you for all your kindness!" said the Minister of Mines. "Say good-night, Lulu. Good-night, Chief Justice."

Nùlma put out her hand to Lady Arthur, and murmured something about expecting her on the morrow. Then she turned to Kenward.

"Good-night!"

"Good-night!" he answered. Lady Arthur watched the lingering contact of the fingers. "I shall see you to-morrow," he added.

Nùlma and her father left the balcony. The other two remained facing each other for a moment or two in silence. Lady Arthur spoke first.

"So the end has come; and I go—to the dust-heap!" she said.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE WOMAN STRIKES.

KENWARD gazed miserably at his companion. Under such circumstances, the man's position must always be abject. He stands self-convicted, a perjurer, a traitor to sworn allegiance.

"Margot," he said, "I know that you look upon me as wholly false and contemptible. I have nothing to put forward in extenuation of myself except this: The position had become impossible, and you recognised it to be so when you offered me my freedom."

"Which you refused to accept, with some tender protestations. It's true, then; the legitimate has conquered, as it always does in the long-run. Do you mean to tell her—about me?"

"Margot, you need not put more daggers into me than are actually necessary. . . . Nothing is settled," he added. "I don't even know that she cares for me."

"Oh, is that all? I am glad, at any rate, that you have had the decency to give me notice of my

discharge. I wondered if you would remember your promise."

"I have not asked her to marry me, if that's what you mean," he answered; "I will not do so if you forbid it."

"Thank you; I have no voice in the matter. You have made your choice. I trust that the Fates may send you happiness."

"It would be more to the purpose, perhaps, if you invoked the Fates on her behalf," he said bitterly.

"Or on poor Mr. Van Vechten's; he is the person outside myself whom I pity most in the concern. Now, Mr. Kenward, will you take me back to my husband?"

"Margot, do we part like this; will you not say one kind word to me—one word of forgiveness? Let us at least be friends."

"Friends!" she repeated in scorn. "How like a man! No, we are not friends; we never have been; we never shall be. From the day that you become Nùlma Goodeve's acknowledged lover, there will be a great gulf fixed between you and me. And all the years of my life will have been swallowed up in that gulf—the years of my life, and everything that made them worth the living."

He gave a low groan.

"*I* have done this thing to you."

"You, and none other. This was not the ending you contemplated, was it, when you asked me

for that camellia bud at the Bourdillons' ball three years ago? I saw her give you the bit of wattle; but that's only to be kept till to-morrow. Well, I was wiser than you; I knew what I was doing. For me, the spectre stood always there in the background—even in the good days—the spectre of the young girl. And I have watched it creep nearer and nearer, till I have seen and known that it was Nùlma. . . . Come, there's no use in talking, and Arthur will be wondering. It would be a pity if he were to become melodramatic now; that would indeed be an anticlimax."

She put her hand on his arm, and they walked back to the ballroom in perfect silence. Lord Arthur was watching for them, a sullen scowl on his heavy face. He made no remark to Kenward, but almost roughly took possession of his wife. They went home alone in the carriage, and all the way he never spoke a word. But whether she looked at him or not, she was conscious of his eyes with that dull, ferocious gleam in them, which of late had got more and more on her nerves. It frightened her.

She lay awake till the sun rose, calm and desperate in her desolation; she felt that she did not care what happened, so long only that Nùlma did not become Outram Kenward's wife.

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There was, however, nothing tragic in Lady Arthur's appearance or manner when, dressed in

her riding-habit, a bunch of violets pinned into her bodice, her gold-mounted whip in her hand, she stepped on to the veranda of the Bunyas. Nùlma was coming in from the plantation, carrying some branches of wattle. She looked very spring-like in a white dress, with only a gauzy hand-kerchief on her head. The sun was bright, the day hot for August, and the roses on the veranda were in bloom, while the deutzia was putting forth its little white spires, and the heavy bunya branches were flecked with buds of shining green.

"Look," said Nùlma, showing her wattle; "I have never known it out so early before."

"Then Mr. Kenward will now be able to finish the picture," rejoined Lady Arthur. "No, my dear, I don't think I'll come in; it's pleasanter sitting here, and I shall keep my veil down, if you please," as Nùlma offered to untie the gauze veil twisted round her riding-hat. "I can't afford, like you, to defy the ravages of a late night, and I'd rather not exhibit myself a battered wreck, with nothing between me and the light of day."

"Why, Lady Arthur, you don't look in the least bit battered, and you have more colour than usual. There's no one so beautiful as you," said Nùlma, in frank admiration.

"Except a certain little girl, who possesses what I have lost for ever—youth, freshness, and wild-flower charm. That's what appeals, especially to

a man like Outram Kenward, who has lived his life among women of the old-world conventional type, and finds change refreshing for a time."

Nùlma flushed uneasily. Lady Arthur's words and tone grated.

"Why do you say that about Mr. Kenward?" she asked in a low voice.

"Because we are old friends, and I am interested in him, and anxious that his career may be successful. He had the prospect of great things if his health had not broken down. He would have had a seat in the House; he might have risen before very long, perhaps, to a seat in the Cabinet. He would have married a rich and well-born woman. He may do all this still—when he returns to England."

Lady Arthur spoke very deliberately. She had seated herself in a deep squatter's chair and leaned back, the light gauze veil obscuring her features, except the brilliant eyes, which turned with slow restlessness from one object to another, lying in wait, as it were, between her half-opened lids. As she spoke, she pulled to pieces a bit of wattle Nùlma had brought in, casting one downy ball after another upon the floor. The action pained the girl, and she made an involuntary movement to protect the remaining clusters. But Lady Arthur stretched out her hand as soon as she had destroyed one spray, and took another, which she began to shred in its turn. Nùlma could bear it no longer. She

gathered up the wattle in her hands and held it on her lap.

Lady Arthur suddenly bent a long, searching look upon Nùlma.

"My dear child, I am very much interested in you also. I should be so sorry if you were made unhappy."

"Will you tell me, please, what you mean?"

"You mustn't be angry with me. I am years older than you are. I know the world. I know men. What is more to the point, I know Outram Kenward. I know that his ruling passion is ambition, and that if in a moment of impulse he were led into a step likely afterwards to injure his career, he would repent it as long as he lived."

Nùlma fluttered like a bird trapped. "I don't know why you should say that to me. I am not likely to do anything which could injure Mr. Kenward's career."

"No, dear," said Lady Arthur cruelly. "He is more likely, I'm afraid, to injure yours. Everyone can see that he is greatly attracted by you; and what is more likely than that you should be flattered by his attentions, and that you should grow to care for one so brilliant and so well versed in the art of charming. But that would be such a sad pity, Nùlma."

"Would it be a pity," murmured the girl, "if he, too, cared?"

"Yes, it would still be a terrible pity. Beauti-

ful and delightful as you are, child, you are too young, too unsophisticated, to hold him when the novelty had worn off—that is, if he were free to ask you to marry him."

"Free!" Nùlma remembered Kenward's words at the ball, "I cannot tell you . . . I must not tell you to-night." Had they meant that he was, as Lady Arthur insinuated, bound to another woman? And if so, how then could he be free to tell her of his love to-day? She had not thought much of his words at the time; she had been too deeply absorbed in the sweet sudden conviction that he loved her. Now the words and the image they evoked seemed luridly illuminated in her imagination. Her beseeching eyes vaguely interrogated Lady Arthur.

"He has not told you? But, of course, how should he? He was not free when he left England. He was bound to a woman whom he loved, and who loved him. I am very sorry for that other woman. I know her, and I know the blow his faithlessness would be to her. I am very sorry for him, too, because I know that in his deepest heart he loves that other woman, and would always regret having lost her."

There was silence. Lady Arthur finished the destruction of her wattle spray. She plucked off the last tiny unfledged ball and cast the stalk away on to the gravel path beyond the veranda. She had a savage satisfaction in the fancy flashing

through her mind, that the act was typical of another work of destruction just accomplished. She had ruthlessly plucked away all the tender buds of a love newly blossoming in a young girl's heart, and had deprived a woman's life of that which should be its crowning joy and sweetness.

She stretched forward and patted the girl's hand, but Nùlma shrank from the touch, her old half-feeling of antagonism against Lady Arthur stirred to a fierce-flaming repulsion. What right had the woman to come here and taunt and humiliate her so?

"I have told you the truth, my dear," said Lady Arthur softly. "I don't pretend it is as much for your sake as for his, and for the sake of that other woman who has a prior claim upon him; but it *is* greatly for your sake, too, and because I think it right that the truth should be known to you."

Then Nùlnia showed that, of whatever poor, plebeian stuff she might be made, it was at least not coward's stuff. She got up, drawing her tall, slim form to its full height, and lifting her little stag-head, with its straight, proud look, out above and beyond her tormentor.

"Thank you, Lady Arthur. You are very good; and I am sure that Mr. Kenward ought to be very much obliged to you, and that other lady, too. But, you see, it hasn't mattered in the least, for Mr.

Kenward had never made love to me at all; and if he had, it would not have made any difference to me, because—I ought to have told you—I am engaged to be married to Mr. Van Vechten."

"Brave baby!" murmured Lady Arthur to herself. "That was well done." And aloud: "I congratulate you, dearest Nùlma, with all my heart. There is no one in Leichardt's Land I like so much and respect so truly as Mr. Van Vechten. You will be very happy."

"Yes; I shall be very happy," repeated Nùlma a little wildly. "I think, if you don't mind, that I'll put the wattle in water, as it withers so soon, and then I'll go and wash my hands for luncheon. I was gardening when you came, and it must be luncheon-time now."

She left Lady Arthur in the veranda, went straight to the old schoolroom at the back of the house, where she always arranged her flowers, put the wattle into a vase, and carried it into the drawing-room. Then she went back again into the schoolroom, sat down, and prepared to write. She sat a moment with her pen poised, and a great wave of pain swept over her, shaking her whole body in inward sobbing. She hardly knew how to bear the agony, and fought with it as for dear life, crushing down the choking pain which seemed to take away her breath. "I must not—I must not," she kept saying to herself, and

then dashed off her note. It had no formal beginning.

"I want to see you. I **MUST** see you, as soon, please, as you can come—before four. *Please* come.—**NULMA.**"

This she directed to Caspar Van Vechten at his office, and took out to the stable-yard, bidding her father's groom ride at once with it to Leichardt's Town.

Luncheon was on the table when she went back, having also washed her hands, smoothed her hair, and endeavoured as far as she could to hide the traces of that recent horrible pain, which remained still upon her face, and gave it a curiously wan and tense look, out of keeping with its girlish contours. To her relief, Luce Perryman was sitting in the veranda with Lady Arthur. Luce had not been invited, but invitations to meals were not necessary formalities between Wirrib and the Bunyas, and Luce was very much in the habit of running in to share Nùlma's luncheon when she felt in a mood for a gossip. She would have run away now, for she was afraid of Lady Arthur, but Nùlma insisted upon her remaining.

They talked mostly of the ball, of the decorations, of the dresses, Luce shyly referring to Lady Arthur, Nùlma chattering with the audacity of desperation. Very soon Lady Arthur ordered her

horse and bade the girls farewell, kissing Nùlma, and whispering as she did so:

"Is it a secret, my dear, or may I tell the Governor? He will be *so* interested."

"Not quite yet, please. Everybody will know it very soon, but not quite yet."

"Very well. You shall come, then, yourself and tell the Governor; I shall write to you and fix a day for luncheon, and perhaps for the last sitting, now that the wattle is out."

The two girls were alone. Nùlma took long strides up and down the veranda, walking like one possessed.

"What is it, Lulu?" cried Luce anxiously. "What is the matter with you? You look queer, somehow. And what did Lady Arthur mean? What is it that you are to tell the Governor yourself? Oh, my goodness, Lulu!" she called out, for the girl would not pause in her wild walk. "It isn't—they were saying last night—— Oh, Lulu, you're not engaged to the Chief Justice, are you? You'd have surely told me before anybody else?"

"No, no, no!" shrieked Nùlma. "And for what should I tell you first? Why should I tell you anything? Go away, Luce. I don't want to talk to-day. I want to be by myself."

"Something has happened!" exclaimed Luce. "I know it. And you look as if for two pins you'd burst out crying . . . and you won't tell me whether you're engaged or not. I think it's awfully unkind,

Nùlma, when I came over here this morning expressly to tell you——” and Luce blushed, and hung her untidy flaxen head.

“ What—that you are engaged, is it? I guessed as much last night. Malcolm Derrett, I suppose?”

“ You know it couldn’t be anyone but Malcolm. It *was* last night. And mother is so angry, and says I must be silly to think of marrying a bank clerk on a hundred and fifty pounds a year; and that it’s throwing away my chances, when there’s you that everyone says has managed to catch the Chief Justice.”

“ Luce, be silent!” cried poor tortured Nùlma. “ You are wrong; and it’s an insult to me for people to be saying such things. Go away. Oh, I don’t mean to be unkind. I’m sure that I congratulate you—on Malcolm Derrett. I’m glad you are so fond of one another. But I’ve got other things to think of now, and I want to be alone.”

Luce departed angry and aggrieved.

“ I don’t know what’s come over you, Nùlma,” she cried in sobbing reproach. “ It’s ever since you’ve been taken up and spoiled by all that Government House lot; and now you haven’t a word for your old friends.”

But Nùlma went on unheedingly.

She was still pacing the veranda like some restless, wounded creature when Van Vechten rode up. He had lost no time in answering her summons.

He dismounted, and, calling the groom to take the horse, went up to her, startled by something unusual in her face and expression. Nùlma gave a little cry, and put her hands in his, leading him into the drawing-room.

"Oh, Uncle Van, it was like you to come at once!"

"Of course I have come at once. Don't you know that I would fly to the end of the world if you sent for me? What is it, Nùlma, my child? My little darling, what can I do for you?"

"You can marry me, Uncle Van. That's what I want; that's what I've sent to you for. I want you to say that you'll marry me."

"Nùlma, this isn't a joke, is it? What do you mean? Why send for me in such a strange, wild way to tell me—that? Child, has anything happened to you? Speak, Nùlma. Tell me, has anyone hurt or insulted you?"

"Yes; I've been hurt, Uncle Van—I've been insulted. No; I don't suppose she meant that. Don't ask me; it doesn't matter now."

"She! There's a woman in it, then? Well, I will ask you nothing that you'd rather not tell; only don't play with me, Nùlma, my dear. That hurts, too."

"I'm not playing with you, Uncle Van. I wouldn't hurt you for the whole world; I care for you too much."

With a quick, passionate movement Van Vech-

ten lifted up her two hands, and held them crushed against his breast.

"Nùlma," he said, "don't tell me things like that unless you mean them, my dear. If you do mean that, you make me very happy."

"Of course I mean it. I sent for you in such a hurry because there isn't much time, because I want to be able to say this afternoon that I'm going to be your wife. I've said it already. I've told Lady Arthur. You won't throw me over now, Uncle Van? You promised——"

"I promised!" he repeated bewilderedly.

"Ah! don't you remember? We both promised. You said that if I should ever find out that I wanted to marry you, and were to come to you and tell you frankly, you'd take me, and be the proudest, happiest man on earth. Those were your words, Uncle Van. And so I do now come to you frankly, and tell you that I want to marry you. Won't you keep your promise? You didn't make any conditions; it was to be a bargain between us. Won't you take me?"

"Yes, I will keep my promise, Nùlma. I will take you as my wife under any, every, or no conditions. I shall be the happiest and proudest man on earth. I shall love you till my dying day, and I will do my best to earn your love."

"Thank you, Uncle Van." His solemnity awed her, and there was a pledge in her brown eyes. "I,

too, will do my best to be a true and loving wife to you," she answered.

"Nùlma," he said, still with great solemnity, "do you know what it means—this marrying, this giving of yourself for life to one man, and one man only? For life, Nùlma, remember."

"Yes," said the girl sadly; "I know now what it means. I didn't quite before when you asked me; I do now."

Her tone stirred a new dread in him, which he knew would ever stand between him and her. The dread forced him to speak.

"Nùlma, there were to be no conditions, and I make none. I only beg you to tell me whether you are doing this because you have chosen me from all other men as the one you most care for—the one you trust most implicitly; or whether it is out of some womanish impulse—pique, perhaps—because some other man whom you do love has wounded your pride and treated you badly? Tell me, Nùlma."

"Yes, Uncle Van. I'll tell you that I do care for you, and that I trust you beyond any other man in the world. Is that enough?"

"It is enough. And so I take you, Nùlma, for my promised wife." He put his arms round her, and, drawing her close to his breast, kissed her on her lips long and tenderly; he drew her to the sofa and made her sit by him. "Nùlma," he said, "from to-day our relation towards each other is a

totally different one. We shall never be the same again."

"Yes, Uncle Van."

There was something to him inexpressibly sweet in the shy movement by which she marked her sense of the new relation, putting her hand softly on his, and then on the dangling seal and pencil-case which hung from his watch-chain, which she played with timidly.

"Is that your crest, Uncle Van?"

"You mustn't call me Uncle Van any more, dearest; it isn't natural now."

"What shall I call you?"

"By my name—Caspar. Say it, Nùlma."

"Caspar. It's a nice name; I like it. Caspar Van Vechten. I shall be Nùlma Van Vechten. That's prettier than Nùlma Goodeve."

"I shall certainly think it so, my dear."

"Caspar, there's something I want you to do for me. Will you do it?"

"I'll try."

"I wan't you to persuade daddy to go away for a change, and to take me with him. There's the Intercolonial Congress now at Melbourne. They asked him to go, and he was talking about it the other day; and I said I'd rather stay here, and so he decided to refuse; but I'd like to go. I'd like to get away from Leichardt's Town now at once; and I could get my trousseau in Melbourne, and perhaps you could come too. Will you talk to

him, and put it all right? Don't you think it would be a good thing, Caspar."

"Yes, I think it might be a very good thing," he answered slowly. "I will see what I can do about it. I have no doubt that, even if one of the other Ministers has settled to go, the thing could be altered."

"And, Caspar, when you go away, will you call at the Mines office, and will you tell daddy? And then—you can tell anyone else you please. I'd like them all to know."

He looked at her flushed face anxiously. Her eagerness for publicity fretted him, and stirred up that dread which was the drop of gall in his happiness. But he was glad, too, that her mind was so firmly fixed. She meant to give herself no chance of wavering. And what did it matter, even if her girlish fancy had been touched, her girlish pride wounded? He had not expected anything from her but a childish affection, which it should be his one care and joy to ripen into a woman's enduring love. He was not afraid; once she was his wife, all the rest would fade into a dream of the morning.

"Do you want me to call upon all the Ministers, and all the heads of departments, and all the bank managers, and proclaim aloud that I am the proudest and happiest man in the world?" he asked, with his slow smile. "I am quite pleased to do it, if it will give you any satisfaction."

"No, no! but you know what I mean. And

you will tell daddy—I want daddy to know before he gets back this evening. And I want everything to be settled about the conference, and our going to Melbourne. You had better go now, Caspar."

"Yes, dear; I have business to attend to. And I will come again this evening."

He kissed her again and left her.

CHAPTER XV.

NÙLMA'S FATE.

NÙLMA would not give herself time to break down before four o'clock arrived. She walked in the garden; she gathered flowers; she fed the Arab in the stables; she fidgeted about the drawing-room; she ran races with the dogs, and when Kenward appeared, she came in, her cheeks pink, her eyes bright, radiant, he thought, with happiness and expectation. He himself looked haggard and anxious. Such of the night as had been left him after the ball he had passed sleeplessly. Margot Keefe's words haunted him, and Margot Keefe's image continually effaced in his imagination that sweet girlish face, upon which his fancy loved to dwell. But the thing was done. He loved Nùlma; he meant to make her his wife. As soon as was practicable, he would throw up his appointment and take her to England, where, away from Margot Keefe's influence, he would begin a new life.

He held out both hands to Nùlma. She came forward constrainedly. The eager words died on

his lips. "I have come——" he began. Then he saw that she held out her right hand only, and that her face had changed. The colour had died out of it, and her soft child's lips were resolutely set. He stopped, released her hand, then deliberately felt in his pocket, and took out a little pocket-book, bound in silver, with his monogram upon it. It had been Margot Keefe's Christmas present to him. This thought struck him now—it had not occurred to him before—and he hated himself for having placed Nülmá's keepsake within it. He took out the bit of wattle and held it to her. "I told you that I was coming to give you this to-day—to ask you to give me something instead of it."

Nülmá took the wattle. It had still a faint fragrance, that inexpressibly mournful fragrance of dead flowers which has something in common with the melancholy of a waltz air. A rush of emotion came over her—the same choking emotion which she had felt in the old school-room when writing to Van Vechten. At any cost she must strangle it. Impulsively she walked to the fireplace, where there was a fire of logs smouldering, and dropped the bit of wattle into the heart of it, where a red glow still remained among the white ashes.

Kenward followed her, his face grim with anger. "Is that your answer?" he said in a low voice.

Nülmá did not reply. She dared not look at him. She stooped, took the poker and poked the piece of wattle further in among the ashes.

"Miss Goodeve," said Kenward, "on my way out here Mr. Latham joined me, and told me a piece of news I did not believe, which he said had only just been made public to-day. I am going to ask you now if it is true."

He waited.

"I don't know what it is," she faltered, still without looking at him.

"You would know at once if it were true. He told me that your engagement to Mr. Van Vechten had just been announced. Is it true?"

"Yes, it is true," Nùlma answered.

"Was it true last night?"

Nùlma kept obstinate silence.

"Was it true when you gave me that piece of wattle?"

But still Nùlma did not answer.

"I see," he said bitterly. "I must beg your pardon for having entirely misjudged you. You have nothing to learn in the art of coquetry from your sisters on the other side of the Pacific. Almost thou hadst persuaded me to be a believer in unsophisticated womanhood. I apologize to you for not having done you justice."

Then Nùlma turned on him, her great brown eyes ablaze.

"You are cruel! you are false!" she said. "You are not like Caspar Van Vechten. You don't know how to be true to a woman! I thought I cared for you for a little while, but only for a little while."

You would have got tired of me. I don't respect you. I respect Mr. Van Vechten. I am going to marry him."

"Then," said Kenward, "there is nothing more to be said, except that I congratulate you upon a choice which must undoubtedly prove for your happiness. Good-bye."

He took up his hat, bowed formally, and left her without even touching her hand. To him Nùlma was now the embodiment of a finished coquette, and his dreams of girlish faith and purity were rudely dispelled. He did not for a moment imagine that the engagement had only taken place that day. He could conceive of no development of circumstances by which it could have been brought so suddenly about, nor did it occur to him that Lady Arthur could have been in any way instrumental in the ruin of his tender hopes. He simply accepted it as a fact that Nùlma and Van Vechten had always been more or less formally engaged—her own remark to him in the beginning of their acquaintance had seemed to imply the fact. Flattered by his own evident preference, she had flirted with him, her apparent innocent candour having been part of the panoply of conquest; then, having brought him up to the point of a declaration, and, her vanity being satisfied, she had calmly decided that Van Vechten was more to her liking and the best match of the two. Thus he reasoned. Of course, Van Vechten was the better match.

Though he himself was Chief Justice and had a certain English prestige, Van Vechten had the reputation of solid wealth. The Minister of Mines doubtless had good opportunities of gauging the merchant's fortune, and, with the long-headed shrewdness of the self-made man, had probably assisted his daughter in making her choice.

So, with these bitter thoughts, Kenward tried to dismiss poor Nùlma and her romance. Next day all Leichardt's Town was talking of the engagement, and most people said that there was nothing surprising in it, and that it had been a foregone conclusion ever since Nùlma had been grown up. Still, people were surprised, all the same, for of late there had been no gossip about Nùlma, except in connection with the Chief Justice's evident preference and Caspar Van Vechten's disappointment. Certain persons—Mrs. Degraves and the President of the Chamber among them—had begun to wonder whether Mr. Van Vechten would console himself with the object of Lady Randal's former manœuvrings, and poor Justin Blaize had suffered from Miss Degraves' coldness in consequence. Now Miss Degraves beamed more friendly glances upon her Bush admirer, and Justin Blaize was happy accordingly.

It happened just then that the little group of prominent people broke up, and social gaieties flagged. Lady Arthur had a neuralgic attack, which

prevented her from giving her weekly reception, or from sending to Nùlma that invitation to luncheon of which she had spoken, and nothing more was heard of the final sitting for the portrait. Then there was a public function up-country—the laying of a foundation-stone, at which the Governor and various official personages were present; so that the Court removed, so to speak, from the capital, and, instead of coming back, took up its quarters at a summer residence of the Governor's, where, as the Leichardt's Town Observer put it, "our beautiful and indefatigable châtelaine of Government House will have leisure to recruit after the fatigues of a too arduous season."

The same chronicler went on to lament the early breaking-up of social festivities, which was perhaps partly the result of a recently-given-out engagement, Miss Nùlma Goodeve, the life and soul of all this winter's parties, having arranged to accompany her father, the Minister of Mines, to Melbourne on the occasion of the Intercolonial Conference, for which he had been chosen as delegate, and, to the regret of the Leichardt's Town *faiscours* (the Leichardt's Town Observer's ladies' column was always Ouidaesque in its phrases), Miss Good-eve had announced her intention of purchasing the greater part of her trousseau in Melbourne. Comment was also made upon the fact that Lady Arthur Keefe, with a praiseworthy loyalty to local industries, had ordered her summer gowns from the es-

tablishment of Messrs. Barnard and Baxter, in Victoria Street.

The Chief Justice, too, shortly after the bachelors' ball, went to pay a visit on the Ubi Downs, and to take part in a great kangaroo battle at the foot of the Ubi Mountains. Thus it happened that Nùlma saw neither Lady Arthur nor Kenward again before she left for Melbourne with her father.

Fate is given to uneven stridings. For a long time she may stand still, sometimes she may saunter, but occasionally she goes galloping. In this story of Nùlma's girlhood, just now the march of Fate quickened day by day, week by week; and it sometimes seemed to the girl as though everything which had ever happened and ever could happen to her was crowded into that brilliant, sad September which she spent in Melbourne with her daddy and Caspar Van Vechten.

It was the Minister of Mines last spring, and the great dinner to the delegates at the opening of the conference was the last official entertainment which he ever attended.

The day after the dinner he went on a boating excursion with Nùlma, Van Vechten, and two Melbourne friends. A thunderstorm sprang up; everyone was drenched to the skin; the boat's return was delayed, and there was no doubt that the sitting for several hours in wet clothes, exposed to a piercing wind which followed the storm, brought on the attack of pneumonia that killed him. No

one else took any serious harm. Nùlma caught a slight cold, and one of the Melbourne friends had a touch of rheumatism. It was as though Fate had singled out the strongest, apparently, of the party for a victim.

He was ill for eleven days. On the tenth the crisis came, and when it was over he sank from exhaustion. So serious from the first were the symptoms, that Van Vechten telegraphed to Mr. Latham; and as it happened that there were certain political complications in regard to the conference requiring action on the part of the Leichardt's Land delegate, the Premier himself came down to Melbourne, bringing his wife with him. They arrived on the very day on which James Goodeve died.

The ex-carrier's end was peaceful. In his delirium he babbled of the Western plains, of his Jenny and the children, and the home in the bullock dray on the top of the wool bales. No coarse language, no bullock-driver's oaths, came from his lips. When he blasphemed, his blasphemies were only gentle girdings against Providence because the bullocks had strayed, or the creeks were up, or the goat had gone dry, so that there was no milk for the children. For the tragedy which had darkened his life he had no reproach now against Providence; Jenny was always with him, and the babies were yet alive.

So James Goodeve died, and went to join his Jenny, far from the Western Bush where she lay

buried. He died in the hotel at Melbourne, and he had a great funeral, and all the intercolonial delegates followed his coffin. The flags on the public buildings were at half-mast, and during the procession the shops were closed. Caspar Van Vechten was the chief mourner; he walked beside Mr. Latham, who was now acting as a kind of guardian to Nùlma. He was, as a matter of fact, the guardian appointed by her father's will in conjunction with Caspar Van Vechten. The will had been made just before the dead Minister had left Leichardt's Town on his last journey, and a few days after the announcement of Nùlma's engagement to Caspar. It was as though Mr. Goodeve had had a presentiment of his approaching end.

When the funeral was over, Van Vechten went back to Nùlma. She was alone in the ugly, glaring sitting-room, with its soiled red velvet upholstery, its gilding and crude carpet, a pitiable object in her deep black, her face pinched and white, her eyes red-rimmed and lustreless, and hardly anything of the old bright Nùlma remaining as it had been, except her untidy mass of yellow-brown hair.

Van Vechten took her in his arms. He had not seen her since they had stood together by her father's death-bed, and James Goodeve had whispered with laboured breath.

“ You will marry—as—soon as possible.”

“ My poor darling!” he said, and kissed her many times, and soothed and comforted her. With

her arms round his necks clinging to him, her face buried in his shoulder, she gave way to a passionate burst of grief.

"I made Mrs. Latham go," she sobbed; "I wanted to see you alone. I felt I couldn't bear it any longer. Oh, Caspar, I want to go away from this horrible place. Why did I ever persuade him to come? Why didn't I let him keep to his refusal? It's I that have killed him. Oh, Caspar, take me away; take me to the Bunyas."

"I have been talking to Mrs. Latham about it," he said, making her sit by his side while he kept his arms round her. "I knew how you would feel; but the conference isn't nearly over, you know, and I can see that she doesn't care to leave her husband. I was thinking how it would be if we telegraphed for Mrs. Perryman and Luce. Of course, it need not be a question of expense to them, and you'd have your old friends with you."

"Mrs. Perryman would drive me mad," exclaimed Nühma; "and as for Luce, she would talk all day of Malcolm Derrett, just as she writes of nothing else now."

"Then, I don't know what we can do except wait for Mrs. Latham," said Caspar doubtfully, "unless——"

"Unless what? Can't *you* take me, Caspar?"

The man's still face twitched slightly. This was almost the only mark of emotion Caspar Van Vechten ever showed.

"I can't take you as you are, Nülmá. I could only take you if you were my wife."

"Well," she said impatiently, "let it be that, then. *He* wanted it. The last thing he said—was that. You can do it when you like, Caspar."

"Nülmá," he cried, "do you know what it means to *you*—and to *me*. Are you sure, child, that you wish it?"

"Why not? *He* wished it. It need not be a grand wedding, Caspar. I don't want a white frock and bridesmaids, and all that. Why mightn't it be done here, now, and only the Lathams know—in some quiet church, and then you could take me away?"

"It could be done, though not quite so easily as you fancy." He explained to her the formalities necessary on account of the difference in their creeds. "Then you would be all mine, Nülmá—my own wife; and I will make you love me."

"But I am very fond of you, Caspar," she replied simply. "You are always so kind, and you understand, and I can say anything to you. I should never be afraid of telling you anything, for I should know you'd understand and help me—whatever happened."

"Yes; I should always help you—whatever happened. Nülmá," he said presently, "there's something else I want to talk to you about. I suppose, dear, you don't know it, but you are a rich woman."

"Am I, Caspar? Well, it doesn't matter much, does it?"

"No, it doesn't matter. I am not badly off myself, and there can be no imputation upon me for having married an heiress. We will go to England by-and-by—whenever you like—and you shall see and do everything you have ever dreamed of. Why do you sigh so, dearest?"

"Oh, I don't know, Caspar. Only I don't seem to want now to see all those things in England. Still, I'm glad I'm rich. I shall be able to give Luce her trousseau: that was a great trouble with Mrs. Perryman."

"You will be rich enough to do a great deal more than that, if you like. Your poor father has left more property, I imagine, than people had any idea of. You are the chief shareholder in Goodeve's Consolation Reef, and the owner of a great deal of land in Leichardt's Town besides."

Nülda did not seem deeply interested in the tale of her wealth, and Van Vechten said no more. After all, as she had remarked, it did not greatly matter. Van Vechten had a long talk with Mr. Latham, who was glad to be relieved of his responsibilities, and was highly in favour of an immediate and quietly-conducted marriage. Only Mrs. Latham who had strong religious views, and whose only objection to Van Vechten lay in the fact of his being a Roman Catholic, demurred a little at the idea of the two ceremonies.

Everything was, however, arranged in its due course and order. The forlorn little bride, dressed in her deep mourning, and accompanied by Mr. and Mrs. Latham, met Caspar at the church, where, without parade, she was married according to one rite, and then they proceeded to the other church, and left it, man and wife, together. Afterwards they drove straight to the steamer in which their passages had been taken to Sydney.

Nülmá was unembarrassed, unemotional, apparently undisturbed by any qualms over the momentous step she was taking. She cried a little in the fly when she talked to Mr. Latham about her father; but she said that she knew Caspar would be kind to her, as her daddy had been, and that her great comfort was that *he* had wished it always.

Mrs. Latham told her husband that she had never seen so strange a bride as Nülmá.

"Well, at any rate, there doesn't seem any doubt as to her fondness for Van Vechten," replied Mr. Latham.

"Doesn't there?" said the lady. "Perhaps not to you, my dear. But if Nülmá were my daughter, or Caspar Van Vechten my son, I should be very unhappy about that marriage. She is no more in love with him than I am with the jingle-driver, but he is so absolutely in love with her that he would cheerfully lay down his life if she asked him to do it."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE HOME-COMING.

WHEN Nùlma, with her husband, entered her new home, almost the first thing which met her eyes was Kenward's portrait of herself facing her in the drawing-room.

It was propped up on a chair, and her own eyes stared at her out of the frame. The picture was quite finished. The wattle, of which a big loose bundle lay in the foreground, had been added, and, Van Vechten observed quietly, had not improved the effect. It was not so well painted as the rest of the portrait.

Nùlma gave a little startled cry. Van Vechten, watching her face, saw her eyes dilate and grow brighter and brighter, till a great tear splashed from her eyelids upon her cheek. He put his arm round her softly, and kissed the tear away, not speaking.

"It was meant for a present to daddy," she whispered.

A note, addressed to "Mrs. Van Vechten," was

stuck into the frame of the picture. Van Vechten gave it her.

"Will you open it, please, Caspar?"

"No," he answered; "I would rather that you opened it yourself."

She gave him a quick, pained look.

"You don't understand," she murmured.

"No, I don't understand quite. It does not matter, my dear; I think I guess enough."

He turned away. Three weeks after their marriage he had come unexpectedly into the room, and had found Nùlma convulsed in an agony of sobs over a letter that she had just received from Kenward. It was only a formal note of condolence with her in her sorrow, and of congratulation upon her marriage. But for Nùlma's emotion, he could have found nothing in the letter to challenge jealousy or suspicion. Yet it seemed to Van Vechten that this letter explained that in his wife which was already turning his marriage into a tragedy.

In truth, the girl he had married did not seem to be his wife, and, sometimes he told himself bitterly, would never be his wife in the real sense of the word. He might be father, brother, friend, to her, but never husband. She might have been some elfin, fleshless creature, to whom the breath of passion was a horror, the material obligations of marriage incomprehensible, were it not that once, when he had come in and looked at her in her sleep, he

had heard her talk in her dream the language of love.

She had loved someone. And who could that be but Kenward? Now his heart was sore within him as he stood at the window, looking out upon the river, while Nùlma read her note. She knew instinctively that he had divined something of the truth. She wished to tell him everything, but her tongue was tied. Before her marriage, she had pictured to herself how, sitting by his side, with her head resting against his knee, she would tell him the story of her girlish love, of her one night's dream of bliss, of Lady Arthur's visit, and of how Kenward had come and gone with the words he had intended to say unspoken. She could not then have imagined it possible that she would hesitate to tell Uncle Van anything that was in her heart, certain of his sympathy and his help, just as she might have told daddy, only that this was a confidence that, much as she loved him, she could never have made to her father. But since one scene that had happened, upon the night of their arrival in Sydney, three days after the marriage, a great black gulf seemed to have opened between herself and Caspar Van Vechten. He stood to her in a relation of which she had never contemplated the exact bearings. He could never be to her the same again. She had seen the man without his mask, and had received a sudden overwhelming revelation of the realities of life and of human nature—a revelation

which had changed her in the space of ten minutes from a girl to a woman. More terrible still, it had had the effect of making her realize also what might have been, what in truth was—her love for Outram Kenward.

After that she could never speak of her inmost feelings to her husband. She wished him to know that she had loved Kenward, and that till her marriage she had not really understood what that love meant, and that had she understood she would not have done him the wrong of marrying him. But, somehow, the words would never come. The days and weeks passed on; the husband and wife walked, drove, ate together; they went about Sydney in a quiet, chastened way, as befitted a mourning pair; they visited the Blue Mountains and the Berrima country, driving for days through a forest of strange old twisted gum-trees, coming unexpectedly upon the thunder of waterfalls, wandering down precipices and gazing along the wild gorges—gigantic chasms which were riven by some world-convulsion out of the side of the great tableland, before ever time was—always alone together, yet never getting any nearer to each other, moving along like two shadows, with the black gulf widening and deepening between, so that they could no longer touch hands or hear each other's voices across the blackness of it.

Now after three months they had come back to the old scenes, and summer was heavy and hot.

The roses were withered and drooping. Scarlet hibiscus and big red and orange blossoms flaunted in the gardens; and the huge clump of bamboos on the hill above Van Vechten's house looked brown and dry and spiky.

The Chief Justice's note was very short.

"DEAR MRS. VAN VECHTEN (it ran): I understand that you are to return shortly, and I venture to send the portrait, for which you were so good as to give me sittings, to your new home.

"You were to do with it, you remember, what you pleased, and I think it was your wish that the one dear to you, whom you have lost, should have it in his possession. He always said that he thought it very like you. Perhaps now you will wish that it should belong to your husband, and if he can find in it a likeness to you which pleases him, he may care to have it, and will on that account forgive its other short-comings. Anyhow, I offer it to you and him with my best wishes for your future happiness.

"I am,

"Yours sincerely,

"OUTRAM KENWARD.

"P. S.—I took the liberty of walking in the plantation at the Bunyas shortly after you went away, and of gathering the bunch of wattle, which I have painted in since you saw the picture."

"Caspar," said Nülmá timidly, advancing to her husband and offering him the note, "Mr. Kenward has sent to you the picture which was intended for daddy."

Van Vechten read the note.

"I am very much obliged to him," he answered, a little stiffly. "I will write at once and thank him. It is a valuable gift, and your father was right. It is very like you."

"Are you glad to have the picture, Caspar?"

"I am glad to possess anything and everything which is a part of you, my dear," he said; and the incident closed.

The bride settled down very quietly to her new life. A great many people were out of Leichardt's Town, as the fashion was during the summer heat —among them, Lady Arthur Keefe, who, with the Governor and his staff, was at Government Cottage on the Ubi Range. The Chief Justice was also absent; but the Perrymans were, of course, at Wirrib, and Luce, full of little airs of importance, which she fancied becoming to a now formally-engaged young lady, came frequently to compare notes with Nülmá, and to discourse upon the emotions to which Malcolm Derrett gave rise in her girlish breast. She was surprised to find that Nülmá was not disposed to make capital out of her own experiences, and had no emotions, or, anyhow, would not own to any, of a thrilling kind. How could a girl go through all the stages of girlhood and

womanhood—coming-out, engagement, marriage, installation as a bride—in a little over six months, and be left quite unmoved thereby? This was Luce's constant wonderment.

Unmoved, but not unchanged. Had any human being ever changed so completely in so short a space as Nùlma? Luce thought this was impossible, and Luce finally decided within herself that it was her father's sudden death, and the fact of finding herself a very rich woman, that had numbed Nùlma's feelings and made her take everything for granted, whereas formerly she would have laughed, cried or "gone into a tantrum," as Luce put it, according as occasion dictated.

Miss Perryman, however, had no cause to be dissatisfied with Nùlma's accession to wealth, for one of Mrs. Van Vechten's first acts of friendship on her return was the presentation to Luce of a very substantial cheque, which would not only remove all difficulty as to the trousseau, but go some way towards furnishing the Malcolm Derretts' modest future abode. Thus, the Perrymans could say nothing but good in general of the bride, though Mrs. Perryman, in confidence to her cronies, would shake her head and declare there was something very wrong about the marriage, and that no one could spend an evening in the society of husband and wife without seeing that they were far from happy.

The report of their matrimonial infelicity got

about, no one quite knew how. It reached the Governor and his circle, and was openly bewailed by the old gentleman, with whom Nùlma was a favourite; it reached Miss Caroline Degraves, now on the eve of being engaged to Mr. Justin Blaize, and gave her a certain vague thrill of satisfaction; it reached also, and half pleased, half disquieted, the Chief Justice.

One morning Nùlma went to her husband, as he was collecting some business letters in his study before going into Leichardt's Town. He had not seen her as yet that morning, for she had not come down to breakfast. She was looking pale and fragile, and—oh, strange occurrence hitherto in Nùlma's young life!—as though she had not slept. Van Vechten greeted her tenderly, kissing her on the forehead and leading her to a chair.

"Are you not quite well, my dear?" he asked.

"Yes; quite well. Caspar, may I ask you something before you go?"

"Certainly; and whatever you ask will, if possible, be granted."

"You are very good to me, Caspar." She hesitated. "I wish I could call you Uncle Van, as I used; I could explain better."

"Then, call me Uncle Van."

"Ah! but you said I must not. And you are my husband, and so, of course, you cannot be 'Uncle Van' any more. Oh, Caspar, if I had only known what it was all coming to, and what it all

meant, I wouldn't have forced you into marrying me as I did. It was a great mistake—a terrible mistake."

"Yes, I am afraid it was a mistake," he answered sadly. "I have spoiled your life, and that was what I always dreaded doing."

"I make you a bad wife, Caspar; I don't make you happy."

"That doesn't matter," he returned decidedly. "And you *do* make me happy. It is happiness to me to live under the same roof with you, to know that you bear my name, to be able to do little things for you that make your life easier. You don't hate me, Nùlma, do you, for having spoiled your life?"

"Oh, Uncle Van—Uncle Van"—the girl sobbed, drawing him to the arm of the great leather chair, in which he had placed her, and leaning her head against his shoulder—"how could I hate you? How could I do anything but care for you, and be grateful for your goodness to me? I do care for you—every way, except—"

"Except the one way in which I wish you to care for me. Never mind, that may come, perhaps, long years hence; and in the meanwhile think of me as Uncle Van, and not as Caspar Van Vechten, your husband."

"It was my doing," repeated the girl, still sobbing. "I made you do it."

"Nùlma," he said gently, "I have never asked

you since that day, but I should be glad to know, for your own sake, my dear, so that I may help you if it ever seems possible. Will you tell me exactly what led up to that request of yours—why you wished me to marry you?"

"I should like to tell you, Uncle Van . . . but it is so difficult."

"I think I can guess partly. I watched you very closely all that winter, and at one time I almost brought myself to believe that you had given your heart to Mr. Kenward."

"Yes, Uncle Van, that was quite true; he made me care for him."

"And he—it seemed to me that he cared for you."

Van Vechten spoke with a studied quietness.

"I don't know." Nùlma hid her face as she spoke low and falteringly, and he stroked her hair and encouraged her to go on, just as in the old time "Uncle Van" might have done. She felt nearer to him then than she had felt in all the days since their marriage. "I thought he cared—once, the night of the bachelors' ball. But, then, I always had the feeling that he only thought of me as a kind of doll—something that amused him a little, and was good to look at. I knew he must feel that we weren't good enough—that we didn't belong to his world, daddy and I; and it hurt me, and made me angry and proud, so that——"

"Yes—so that, Nùlma?"

"So that the bitterness seemed to swallow up the caring sometimes. And I didn't know; I was only a child, Uncle Van. I didn't become a woman till I married you."

"Ah!" He gave a heavy sigh. "I have made you a woman, but not in the right way. Well, my dear, tell me—the night of the ball. Did the Chief Justice lead you to think then that he wanted you to be his wife?"

"No, not quite. He said there was something he must not tell me then. He was coming the next afternoon."

"And he came?"

"Yes; he came. But Lady Arthur came to luncheon, and she told me——"

"Lady Arthur!" he repeated sharply.

"She said she had known him for a long time. She said he was not free to ask me to marry him—that there was another woman to whom he was bound, and whom he loved and who loved him."

"Lady Arthur told you that? Now I think I understand."

"What do you understand, Uncle Van?"

"No matter, my child. Lady Arthur strengthened your suspicion, no doubt, that he was merely attracted by your pretty face, and that if he married you he would afterwards be sorry."

"Yes, that was what she said."

"My God!" said Van Vechten passionately. "It was a cruel, cowardly woman's trick."

"Uncle Van," said Nùlma slowly, "do you think—sometimes I have fancied it—that Lady Arthur, though she is married, cared for Mr. Kenward herself?"

"I think it is possible," replied Van Vechten grimly. "Never mind, Nùlma; that need not concern you. And so when Mr. Kenward came and asked you to be his wife, you told him of Lady Arthur's warning?"

"No; I did not mention that. How could I let him think I cared? I was mad, Uncle Van—I was wicked. I wanted to hurt him. I wanted that he should know I was worth more than—a mere plaything. I sent for you—and you know. And when he came I told him that I was engaged to be married to you. And he never asked me anything. He went away. You see, it isn't much to tell. That is all."

"Yes; that is all," Van Vechten repeated; and then there was a silence, during which he still stroked his wife's hair. His heart was full of anger and resentment against Lady Arthur, and the thought uppermost in his mind was that he would avenge Nùlma. Presently he said: "You have not told me yet what it is you wished to ask me."

Nùlma hesitated.

"I don't know whether I'll ask it now, Caspar."

"You may safely do so, dear. Whatever it may be, I shall not be hurt or vexed."

"Caspar, will you let me go back to the Bunyas again?"

"Back to the Bunyas? do you mean that we should leave this house?"

"No; not that. This is your home. I want to go back by myself—to my own old home just for a little while. I want to try and feel myself a girl again. I think I should be happier if I could be by myself for a short time."

"You are not happy, then, Nùlma? No; it is absurd to ask—of course, I see for myself that you are wretched."

"I ought not to be wretched, Uncle Van. I keep telling myself that there's no girl in the world should be so happy as I. I don't think I'm wretched, really. But it's all so strange, and I feel so lonely, sometimes."

"Lonely?" he interrupted.

"You see, Uncle Van, I'm not a girl any more; and sometimes it seems as though my life were ended when it had never begun. And there are so many years to live, so many years from eighteen to fifty, even—to be as old as Mrs. Perryman. I shall get used to it in time. And I miss daddy—I miss daddy. I wasn't always good to him. I didn't appreciate him as I ought. I didn't love him as I ought, but there will never be anybody like him for me in all the world."

She fell to sobbing. Caspar did not take her in his arms this time and soothe her grief with ca-

resses. He looked on silent, immovable, except for the twitch at the corner of his mouth. At last he said:

"I think you are right, dear. It will do you good to be by yourself in your old home for a short time. Don't stay too long, Nülmá. That would set people wondering, and perhaps saying unkind things about us both. I will make arrangements for you to go at once. I can easily explain that there are matters you have to see about, for which you must be on the spot. And I will not break in upon your solitude."

"Thank you, Caspar!" She lifted his hand and timidly kissed it. "But I did not mean that. I should like you to come and see me if you wish."

"Very well. I will watch over you from outside the gates, and if you want anything you have only to send to me. As I go to town now, I will call in and tell them you are coming, and to have dinner for you this evening. Everything is exactly as you left it—even *his* room. Latham and I merely looked for some necessary papers. We thought you would prefer to go over the others yourself."

"Thank you, Caspar," she repeated submissively.

"Good-bye, my dear! God bless you!" He lifted her face to his between his two hands, and looked down into the clear brown eyes. "Yes," he said, as if speaking to himself; "they are very true; there's not a shadow of dishonesty in them.

Always be true to me, Nùlma. Never try to conceal your feelings. Do not be afraid to tell me even that you love another man. There is no shame in it, to you. You do not know what evil is, and I pray Heaven that you never may. You never shall, so long as I am able to ward it from you. Courage, my child! It seems a long time, as you say, to look forward—from eighteen to fifty. But the end may come sooner than you think."

He kissed her very tenderly and went to the door. Then he stopped for a moment and smiled back upon her.

"Good-bye, my dearest! And you know it is only a little way from the Bunyas here, and I will see that Bailey and the trap are there ready for you, so you will only have to step into the pony-carriage and come back to me when you are tired of being alone."

CHAPTER XVII.

THE ORDEAL.

NÜLMA found, when she took up her abode at the Bunyas in the evening, that everything had been arranged by Van Vechten with such fore-thought and kindness that it seemed the most natural and right thing for her to thus change her residence from under her husband's roof to the home of her girlhood. Van Vechten had even called at Wirrib, and, with some slight deviation from the truth, had informed the Perrymans that at his urgent entreaty Nülmia had consented at last to go over her father's papers, and all the things in the house, with a view of determining what should now be done with the Bunyas. The thought of this, he said, had been intensely painful to her, and they had agreed together that she should be left quite alone with her sad memories, and thus grow to realize the change which had befallen her. He therefore begged that Luce and Mrs. Perryman would check their natural and affectionate impulses, and refrain from going near her.

This Nülmia learned in a little letter from Luce, which was brought her in the morning.

It was as Caspar had said. Nothing had been altered. Most of the old servants remained. Her father's pipes hung in the rack over the mantelpiece in his study; his papers and letters lay in the lettered pigeon-holes of his *escritoire*. The clothes she had left behind her were in the drawers in her room, and some of her old programmes were still stuffed between the wall and the looking-glass. She could almost have imagined that her marriage was a dream, as she lay down to sleep in the little white bed, with its pink-trimmed mosquito-curtains, in which she had dreamed a different dream—one of intoxicating happiness—in the early morning after the bachelors' ball.

She was like a ghost coming back out of ghostland. That phrase, unconsciously repeated to herself, expressed everything. On the day of her marriage she had died, and ever since she had been living in ghostland.

The first day she wandered and dreamed again. She had the fancy, even, to pace the veranda with the old spelling-book, and learn the very lesson Van Vechten had interrupted on the day of that ride, and of that strange conversation—so memorable, and yet then to her so little more than a child's joke—the conversation in which Van Vechten had made her promise that if ever she wished to marry him she would frankly tell him so. Well, that conversation and that compact had been the pivot on which her whole life turned. If she had not made

that half-jesting promise, she would not now be Van Vechten's wife.

She roamed the garden in the afternoon; she sat out under the passion-vines, where often during the short period of his intimacy at the Bunyas the Chief Justice had sat and talked to her. She walked in the plantation, where just one or two late sprays of wattle-bloom flecked the blue-green boughs, looking brown, scorched, and out of date. She sat in the veranda opposite the squatter's chair in which Margot Keefe had tilted herself while she pulled the young blooms to pieces, and, as she did so, had destroyed the girl's faith in the man she loved. The whole scene came back to Nülma with new flashing lights illuminating the woman's perfidy, and the girl grew hot and cold and crimson and pale again. A thousand trifles, looks, words, tones, tiny incidents of the sittings at Government House, to which in her absolute innocence she had attached no meaning, now came back to her with a horrible significance. Had they loved each other, then, those two? And if so, how had he dared—oh, how had he dared!

In her passion of shame and resentment, she felt that she must know the truth. She was in the mood, had Lady Arthur been at Government House, to have gone forth and arraigned her.

She was so restless that she walked about the garden half the night. There was a young moon; the trees and shrubs cast grotesque shadows; the

air was heavy with scent. She felt a thrill of satisfaction in her loneliness. It was a relief to know that Caspar, in his own house half a mile away, could not watch for the light through her door-crevice, or listen for the restless movements, the stealthy opening of French windows, and uneasy pacings on the veranda outside her room, upon which he would sometimes comment in the morning, and thus betray his knowledge of her wakeful nights. That tireless, unobtrusive espionage had sometimes exasperated her almost beyond endurance, and yet she had at moments an inconsistent longing to go to him and sob out her restlessness upon his breast.

The relief of her freedom made her now stretch out her arms to the night and take long, deep breaths of the hot, scented air. She had gone quite to the end of the garden, had emerged from the untidy gloom of a banana thicket, and stood by a low fence, with broken palisades, partly hung by a ragged vine of the native cucumber. Beyond were a few straggling bushes of lantarna, some gum saplings, and a heap of stones and earth where the bank shelved abruptly to the river. At the foot of the bank was a dilapidated boat-house, and beside it a set of slimy steps. The boat-approach was occasionally used by friends living on the water's edge, but the late Minister of Mines had not kept a boat, and had always had plenty of horses, so that the river had never served him as a highway.

The river stretched out below a great black shadow, with faint moonlit streaks where the pale track crossed it, and red lights here and there, showing barges and ferry-boats lying close into shore, while further back again, climbing the opposite slope, were white cottages nestling in gardens and groves of bananas.

Minyando was one of these. There was a light burning in one of the French windows. Did it mean that Kenward was at Leichardt's Town? Nùlma gazed wistfully towards the light in that little low house, which perhaps, but for Lady Arthur, might now have been her home. And her father would be alive, too, for he would not then have gone to Melbourne. The lights of her real home were burning likewise. As she turned her eyes leftward up the river, the Bamboos, with its big "Prince of Wales's feathers" clump above the lights, drawn black against the dark sky, seemed to dominate the whole scene. She turned away with a kind of smothered gasp. It seemed as though even here she could not escape that unceasing watch.

Had she known it, the watch was very close. Not twenty paces from her, behind a lantarna bush, stood Van Vechten, who had stolen forth miserably, seeing the lights burning in Nùlma's chamber, to assure himself that all was well with his beloved.

Another pair of eyes had been observing that same light in Nùlma's bedchamber. At the foot

of Minyando garden there was a boat-house, too, and moored by it a long narrow dainty little craft. On hot moonlight nights Kenward often took refuge in the boat; and, pushing out, drifted along with the tide. He cast himself adrift now. He had come back only that day. Of Nùlma he had heard no news, and was not aware that she was staying in her old home. He looked up from the river and saw the light. During his visits to the Bunyas he had got to know the plan of the house, which is not difficult in Australian establishments, where rooms give out on verandas, and French windows are generally open. He wondered who could be occupying Nùlma's chamber, and whether the Van Vechtens were now living there instead of at Caspar's own house. But the lights in the Bamboos, shining in both stories, contradicted this theory. He pulled close to the bank, and lay on his oars just far enough to see through the rifts in the lantarna bushes into the garden. He rocked himself there, keeping in position with one oar for a long time. Once he thought he saw the figure of a man on the bank below the garden, moving among the lantarna shrubs and gum-saplings, and idly speculated as to the chances of its being a burglar. Then something white flitted across the opening he commanded. He gave a great start. The night was full of shadows, and the moon made but a dim palleness, and every now and then, passed altogether behind clouds; but it had been clear enough for

him to see in that moving shape, in the poise of the head and carriage of the shoulders, Nùlma. He waited on, but the shape did not return past the opening. The other dark shape he now saw distinctly emerge from behind a lantarna bush, and the man, with his back to the river, so that even had it been light enough Kenward would not have been able to identify him, climbed up the slope and disappeared into a path leading between the garden-paling of the Bunyas and a paddock-fence beyond, up to the main road. He concluded that the man, who might possibly have been reconnoitring with ultimate nefarious intent, did not propose putting any such into execution to-night.

Kenward rowed out again further into the stream. It was too dark to distinguish any object in the mass of shadows, but he fancied he saw something white gleam faintly against the blackness of the house and then disappear.

The next day he called at the Bamboos. In answer to his inquiries, he was told that Mrs. Van Vechten was not at home, and that Mr. Van Vechten generally got in about five, but had been later the last day or two. Further inquiry as to whether Mrs. Van Vechten was likely to be at home after dinner, a favourite time for paying calls in the Australian summer, told him all he wanted to know. "No; Mrs. Van Vechten was staying for a short time at the Bunyas alone. Mr. Van Vechten didn't go over of evenings, or any time. Mrs. Van Vech-

ten was settling things over there, and had wanted to be by herself."

To Kenward that piece of information, delivered by a talkative Irish maid, who no doubt had her own views concerning the relations of her master and mistress, seemed to unfold a new and tragic view of the marriage. "She had wanted to be by herself." Then, the gossip which had reached him was not without foundation. Nùlma was unhappy.

A longing to see her and to judge for himself took possession of him. He was tempted to go on to the Bunyas, but he dared not. No doubt he would be refused admittance. That night he went out again in the boat, and lay off the landing-stage below the Bunyas. He excused this proceeding to himself on the ground that it behoved him to see whether the man he had watched the previous night still lurked among the lantarna shrubs. Nùlma was alone; the man might be a robber, and who could blame him for drawing thus near unseen, ready to guard her? And then—for the night was hot, heavy and almost unbearable within doors—might she not again be roaming sleepless in the moonlight, and might he not this time get a clear vision of the face he loved?

The face that he loved! Yes, that was what it came to. This child had wound herself round his very heart-strings. He could never tear her away. All other loves, to this one, had been as smoke-dimmed furnace fire to the pure light of the rising

sun. His old passion, merged later into pitying, half-contemptuous affection for Margot Keefe, existed no longer. He loved Nühma, and only Nühma. His intuition told him that she had given him her heart, and that the engagement to Van Vechten had been some horrible blunder—perhaps an exaggerated fad of honour, perhaps a girl's coquettish whim, perhaps an impulse of pique. Somebody might have told her something against him. The somebody might have been Margot. For the first time the thought struck him. But it was impossible. Margot could not have been so base. And for her own sake she would have been silent.

The moon was less of a crescent to-night; there were fewer clouds. Possibly for this reason the mysterious would-be burglar had thought it more prudent to defer his projects. Kenward could see no sign of the dark shape among the lantarna shrubs. But, then, his eyes were straining wildly for another fairer shape. Down near the bank the mosquitoes buzzed. There were one or two slimy mangroves close by the boat-house, and a chucky-chucky-tree dipped its boughs into the turgid water. The mosquitoes, even a few feet higher, would be less troublesome. Why should he not moor his boat, crawl up the steps, and lie in wait among the lantarna shrubs also, below the paling? Then he would be less likely to attract observation; he would certainly be more comfortable, and he would be closer at hand if the burglar did show himself.

Kenward yielded to the pressure of the arguments, though his sense of humour prevailed sufficiently to make him quite conscious of their sophistry. He almost laughed aloud as he took up his position below the palings. Truly an undignified proceeding for the Chief Justice of Leichardt's Land, who was, moreover, of an age unbefitting such lovers' escapades. Never in his calf-days had he descended to such folly. He thought of the biting comments which would have tripped readily from Margot Keefe's tongue.

It was early yet, comparatively. The house was not closed—if, indeed, Australian houses in those primitive days could ever have been said to be closed on summer nights. Ten strokes from the clock over the Court-house floated faintly along the river from Victoria Street. Lights were burning in several of the French windows which opened on to the veranda. From where he stood he could see right up the garden, along a diagonal path through the banana thicket, to the broad central walk which ended in a sort of trellis of passion-vines.

There was a sound of stir in the veranda—of a chair being dragged along the boards, and of voices, one rough and uncultured, the other low and sweet, with that slight fall of cadence and tendency to drawl which gives a plaintive note to a woman's voice, when it is not exaggerated into what is called the Australian accent, an exaggera-

tion, alas! that has grown with generations. Kenward could not hear the words, but he knew the voice for Nùlma's. Probably she was saying that she would not go to bed yet, for by-and-by, through the rift in that wall of banana leaves and thick pulpy stems, he saw something white flitting; and then on the broad walk, close by the trellis, the white shape halted, standing wraith-like for a few minutes, finally sinking into indistinctness within the shadow of the trellis.

An uncontrollable impulse leaped within Kenward. He must see her. To be so near, and not even to catch a glimpse of her features, was more than he could endure. In a moment he had vaulted the low paling and stood in the gloom of the banana thicket. He fancied that he heard a rustling behind him, but when he looked, there was nothing to be seen, and he walked boldly on towards the arbour. This could, in truth, hardly be called an arbour, being a trellis-wall overgrown with a vine, that had flung grappling tendrils across to the bare branches of a gum-tree, which had been left to exist only in right of a rather fine cactus trained up its stem. There was a bench with a back to it standing close to the gum-tree, and sheltered by the trellis, and on this bench, with her arm thrown over the back, one hand supporting her head, Nùlma was sitting.

She was in a muslin dress, with her head bare, and the loose, wide sleeves of her gown falling

away from the round, slim arm. Her hair was very simply dressed, and her whiteness and slenderness and extreme girlishness seemed accentuated in the moonlight, so that, combined with her loneliness, they gave her a touch of pathos which almost amounted to tragedy. But as he got nearer he saw that there was indeed something tragic in the expression of her face, which he fancied had grown smaller, and in the outlook of the brown eyes, from which tears were dropping. He saw a great drop splash down upon her shoulder, and then the bosom heaved, the shoulders shook in a log-drawn sob, and Nùlma drooped her head and covered her face with both hands, weeping unconstrainedly.

He let her weep on for several minutes. The sobbing turned into sharp gasps that were each like a knife thrust through the poor, quivering frame. The sound of them was to him as a physical hurt. He stepped impetuously forward, and as her hands dropped in the startled movement she made, he caught them, and, flinging himself on the bench beside her, held them tight against his breast.

“No, Nùlma, you mustn’t take them away, you must let them stay there. And you must speak the truth to me, for I will have nothing less from you now—as I shall speak the truth to you.”

CHAPTER XVIII.

“THERE’S NO THIRD PLACE IN IT.”

IT was the real man who spoke in those curt, masterful sentences, whose eyes, gazing straight into hers, from which the tears, arrested, and gathering into greater drops, plashed slowly now on his hand, seemed to be piercing through all disguises and tearing away every veil that hung between their souls. This real man was not the Kenward she had known, any more than she was the Nùlma with whom he had danced on that last evening of her happy girl-life. This was a stern, forceful being, whom she must obey, and with whom there could be no shift of conventional barriers and excuses. Instinctively she knew this, and there was not a thought in her mind of resisting his will.

“What is the truth?” she asked.

“That I love you with my whole heart and soul, and that I know you love me. And after that truth, Nùlma, the lie, whatever it may be, that made you untrue to yourself and that parted us. You never loved Van Vechten; you loved me! Deny it—if you dare.”

- "I don't dare. If I denied it, you'd have the right to despise and hate me. I don't want that. And I'm not ashamed of it. I will not be ashamed of what is my very self."

"There speaks my brave, true soul of the Bush! my free, fearless Nùlma! my wild wattle-flower! my heart's love!"

"You tell me that I am your heart's love, and that is why I am not ashamed. I did not know it before; and I wanted to hide from myself and from everyone how much I cared. But it was of no use! And then," her voice dropped, "I had not learned the true meaning of love."

"And now, Nùlma, what has taught you the true meaning of love?"

"My marriage!" she said.

He had expected the answer; it hurt him.

"You are *not* married!" he cried. "You may wear Van Vechten's ring on your marriage-finger, but you really are not Van Vechten's wife. Don't tell me to believe it. Your eyes and your lips deny it. I've read the look on brides' faces; it isn't on yours. I see straight down into the depths of your dear eyes. They are the eyes of a girl. Your lips are the lips of a girl. It is not your marriage which has taught you. You are a girl still. If you were not a girl in heart, your eyes would droop before mine, and you would not be able to look at me and say, 'I love you!'"

It seemed as though she wished to answer tho

challenge, for she said, without turning away her gaze:

"I do love you. But my marriage has been to me as the well of truth. I have looked deep down into it. I may be a girl still, but in some ways I am also a woman to know good from evil."

There was silence for a minute or two. He took away her hands from his breast, where he had held them tight clasped, and very quietly kissed them one after the other. He held the left one longest. There was no ring on it, except the wedding one. Then he laid her hands in her lap.

"I understand you. I'm sorry for him, though he is called your husband. I am still more sorry for you and for myself. What is to be the end of it all, Nùlma?"

"The end!" she said wildly, and unconsciously; then, repeating the words she had used to Van Vechten, "There are so many, many years to live from eighteen to—fifty."

"Only eighteen! Poor little child! And I'm nearly fifty, Nùlma—getting to what you fancy is the end, while you are only at the very beginning. But fifty isn't the end, child. Life goes on a great deal longer than that, and we've either got to submit and bear it, or else rebel and take our fate into our own hands."

He watched her anxiously as he spoke, but his words did not seem to convey to her any meaning. Suddenly she asked:

"How is it that you came to-night? I don't understand. It seems so wonderful that you should be here, and that we should be talking like this."

"There's nothing wonderful in it. I often come out on the river on hot nights. I came out last night and drifted across here. And then I fancied that I saw a man in the bushes watching you; the thought came to me that he might be plotting some mischief, and that you were alone, and—oh, well, I suppose that serves for a decent excuse to myself. But it doesn't excuse my having stolen into the garden like this. The fact is that I couldn't stand it. I felt that I *must* look at your dear face again; and then, when I saw you crying, the scales fell off, and I knew that if it were only for once in our lives we two must see straight into each other's souls. . . . Nùlma—the truth—the truth! There's more to learn. What changed you in those few hours—from the time you gave me that bit of wattle to the moment when you threw it in the fire and told me that you were engaged to Van Vechten? You were not engaged to Van Vechten when you gave me that wattle?"

"No."

"Then, in Heaven's name, what do things mean? Impossible that you could have become engaged to him between then and my coming out to the Bunyas!"

"That is what happened. I sent for him. I asked him if he would marry me. That had been

an understanding between us. I think I once told you."

"I thought it a child's innocent joke, and for that very reason never felt jealous of Van Vechten. Nühma, be honest with me. I will not stir from this spot till I know the exact truth. What made you send for Van Vechten?"

"Something which happened to make me doubt you, and that hurt me bitterly and drove me wild with pain and anger."

"What was that? Something which was told you."

"I was led to believe that you did not really care for me—that you had only just a passing fancy for my face, and that, if you yielded to it, you would always be sorry for having broken faith with another woman."

Kenward drew a deep breath as if he had been hurt.

"Were you told who that woman was?"

She, too, winced with pain and a gnawing terror which, since it had come upon her first, she had striven her best to crush out of life.

"It was true, then?" she said very low. "You had no right to come to me?"

"I had only the right of a man who loved you—a man no better than many another man who has forged for himself unlawful fetters, and perhaps no worse. I make no pretence to being a saint. I've lived the life of men of the world—a life you know

nothing of and need never know. I've done what you would consider very evil . . . because you don't understand the base nature in man which makes it a necessity to him to love, and causes him to love in so many degrees and fashions. To a good woman as you are, love means only one thing. To us men it means many things, until at last, and once only in our lives, the true angel of love appears in our path, and we are rebaptized and regenerated, and unworthy love is henceforward an impossibility to us. So it was that, unworthy as I knew myself, I still dared to hope that our lives might be one."

He had got up from the bench, and was standing over her, his face working with emotion. She, too, had risen, and her eyes were searching his, and seemed to beseech him to destroy the indeterminate horror which was rising between them and blotting out all her previous conception of him.

"Don't," she said—"don't tell me any more; I'd rather not know that you were bad."

"Nùlma, you must know me as I am. I said that there should be truth between us, and I will tell you everything—everything that I *can* tell you. There are things in a man's life which affect others—whom he is bound to guard, and of which he may not speak, even to his wife. But I cannot let you go on believing me a mere brute—believing I could turn from you to another as the fancy took me. Nùlma, give me your hands."

She made a motion as if she would have refused, but he seized her two hands and held them again tight against his breast.

"You must at least know this," he said: "the —the bond of which you were told had been broken before I ever met you. There's no need to speak of it. I owe that, at any rate——"

"Oh," she interrupted with a sharp exclamation of pain, "don't hurt me more than you can help!"

"I hurt you! Oh, my darling, my darling! when I think of the long hopeless years to come, I feel that I could die to make you happy. But there'd be no use in that, Nùlma; you wouldn't be happy if I were gone out of your life for ever; you'd want me to stay and be happy with you. For you love me, dearest; you have told me so."

"No," she cried; "you are wrong, and you *are* gone out of my life for ever. I did love you; I do still love that other *you*, who yet was never you, and I shall always love him and think of him as my girl's ideal, standing high and apart from all other men, but who is dead, or, indeed, who only existed in a girl's dream."

"Not in a girl's dream, Nùlma, but in a woman's real living forgiving love. Don't shrink from me, dear angel. Forgive me, and take me into your heart, and believe that my eternal love for you is great enough to bridge over the gulf between angels and erring men. Forgive me, Nùlma!"

She shook her head wildly, and tried to take away her hands.

"Let me go; I don't want ever to see you again."

"Nùlma, it is impossible that I can let you go like this. Do you think I am going to give you up, knowing that you have worked yourself into a scorn and loathing of me which are not deserved. Bad as I am, I have not wronged you. I have not been false to you."

"You have not wronged me? you have not been false to me?" she repeated, in low, scathing tones. "What have you been to me from the beginning but a living lie?"

"Be merciful, Nùlma. You have exaggerated the evil of a position which was false, I own, but was unavoidable. If you knew the world better, you would not judge me so hardly."

"I am glad that I do not know the world—*your* world. I wished it once; I do not now."

"Heaven forbid," he answered, "that you should be less innocent, less ignorant, than you are. But by-and-by the horror you feel will pass, and then it may be too late to take back that cruel sentence. If you order me to go, I will throw up my appointment, and leave Leichardt's Land. But oh, Nùlma, there is another alternative."

She gave him a swift, piercing glance, and then waited, silent, her eyes cast down.

"Dearest, you love me—in my very soul I know

it; and I love you and cling to you as to the hope of salvation. I *can't* give you up. We have been sacrificed, both of us—I through my own miserable sin and folly, and you innocently through me. Your marriage has been a hideous blunder; undo it, before worse suffering comes. I am ready to throw up my career, everything, for you, and to count the world well lost if I gain you. We will go to America, Europe, anywhere that you please, and begin a new life together. Trust yourself to me, my love—my love; you will never regret it."

He wound his arms round her, and the girl, carried away by his vehemence, let him draw her to him, and for a moment or two her head lay against his breast, and the cold misery in her upturned face seemed about to melt under the warmth of his caress. But the very touch of his lips roused the sleeping horror. With a movement of repulsion she wrenched herself free from him, and stood quivering like a storm-swayed lily, reproaches shining in her eyes, and rushing brokenly from her lips:

"It is wicked of you to speak to me so. You take advantage of my saying that I loved you, to try and make me no better than you are yourself. At least, I can be faithful to something. I can be faithful to a girl's dream, and I will not let you say things which are a shame and an insult to the other *you* I loved. But you—to what are you faithful? Not to your love for me, for you want to drag it down to the level of that other love which you are

ashamed of. Did you ask *her* to leave her husband for you, or did you shelter yourself under her husband's friendship? . . . Oh, I am not innocent nor ignorant any longer. . . . I understand now everything that was hidden under the talk and the laughing, and the pretence of enjoying life and doing the right thing, and being popular and kind—kind to ignorant, silly girls like me. If I had not been ignorant and silly and blind, could I have grown to care for you? Wouldn't I have rushed away from it all—in shame and horror? Wouldn't I have gone to daddy, or to Uncle Van, as I want to go now, and make them keep me safe with them. . . ? No; don't say anything. What is the good of excuses? it's over and done with, and I'm glad—glad now. And when I think of *her*—I know now why sometimes I shrank from her. Oh, the poor thing, smiling and pretending to be happy, and her heart breaking! I pity her from the depths of my soul. . . . But you have no pity for her, and in time you'd have come to have no pity for me.”

“Nùlma,” he cried out despairingly, for she had turned away with no further farewell, and was moving towards the house, “have you not one kind word for me?”

She paused.

“Go to *her*—that other woman—and say to her what you have said to me. It is her right, not mine. Good-bye, Mr. Kenward. Do not come here any more. I am going to my husband, and I will tell

him everything. I will ask him to take care of me and keep me good." Then she uttered a little startled cry, "Caspar! oh, Caspar!"

A man stepped from behind the trellis, and went rapidly towards her, not turning one glance on Kenward. He took her in his arms.

"Nùlma, my wife! I was close to you, waiting to take care of you—to protect you even against yourself. Thank God there was no need for that!"

She had flung herself upon his neck, and clung to him sobbing hysterically for a moment or two. Then he felt the grasp relax, and her form hung inert against him. He saw her face deadly white in the moonlight, and her eyes closed, and he knew that she had fainted.

He carried her to the veranda, and laid her on a basket-chair, while he brought restoratives and chafed her hands and fanned her. Presently she opened her eyes and shivered violently.

"Caspar, has he gone?"

"I don't know, dearest. If he has not gone, he will go before long. Don't worry about it. You are safe with me."

"You heard, Caspar?"

"Everything, my child. I have no shame in telling you that I watched your meeting, and that I waited and listened to all that passed between you. I need not have feared for you, my wife. I did not doubt that you were brave and pure, but I knew that you loved him, and I trembled for what

might come. I would have died to save you, Nùlma."

She clung to him anew.

"It's all over now, my foolish girlish dream. Oh, Caspar, what have I done? I have ruined your life, too. Our marriage is indeed a hideous blunder."

"I think not. If it were all to be done over again, and I could begin here now and win you as I would wish to win you, I am almost certain that you would not find our marriage a hideous blunder. Will you let me try, Nùlma?"

She put her hand in his and stroked it softly.

"Haven't you been trying all along—to win me? And I don't deserve it."

"Not in the right way. Nùlma, I'm going to quote you something out of a play I'm very fond of. It is called 'The Duchess of Malfi.' And these are the lines:

"Marriage is either heaven or hell :
There's no third place in it."

"I like that," she said; "it's true. I should like you to read me the whole of that play."

"Very well. I will read it to you on winter evenings in England, when we sit Darby and Joan fashion by our own fireside."

"In England?"

"I'm going to take you away, Nùlma, now at once, and to begin my work of wooing my wife."

"But—oh, Caspar, it is what I longed for! But the work, the business, everything that's important, how can you leave it all?"

"Nothing is of any importance in comparison with what is best for you. That can be easily arranged. Anyhow, I'm going to set about arranging it to-morrow."

She raised herself in the big chair, and her eyes roamed over the garden.

"Dearest," he said, "are you better now? Would you like to go to bed?"

"What is the time, Caspar?"

"It struck eleven not very long ago. Shall I carry you to your room?"

"No—no; I can walk. I am quite well. How stupid it was of me to faint! I have never fainted in my life before. . . . Caspar, it's been very lonely here."

"Poor child! And these long two days you have been by yourself, brooding over your sad fancies."

"The place is full of ghosts," she went on. "There's the ghost of daddy, who is gone for ever, and of a man called Uncle Van, who was always good to me, but who seems somehow to have died, too; and there are the ghosts of a man and woman who I think must have been fallen spirits, sent to earth for each other's punishment; and there's the ghost of a girl whose name was Nùlma, and who is dead and gone, like the rest of them. That mar-

riage service in the churches in Melbourne was her burial service."

"I will take you away, dear, from all these melancholy dreams. I ought never to have yielded to your wish of being here alone."

"No; it was good for me. I seem to have learned a great deal in these two days. Perhaps daddy's spirit spoke to me. All the time someone or something seemed to be saying to me, There's nothing so good as love. Love is the only thing. Marriage without love is—what you said, Caspar. And I seemed to look forward, and to see years and years ahead, of loneliness and strangeness, and you and I growing further apart, friends no longer as we used to be, understanding each other no longer—always with that black, awful wall which marriage raised between us, growing deeper and higher. And that was why, as I sat in the garden this evening, I cried and cried in my despair."

"Nùlma," he exclaimed, "give me your trust, child; take me into your life. I will be so good to you. I will not exact too much; I will be patient; I will wait. Some day you will come to me yourself and say, 'I am your wife, Caspar.' Till then I will be to you your brother, friend, whatever you like best, only there must be no wall between us, dearest. From this moment I destroy it." He took her in his arms, and kissed her on her lips. "Henceforth, my darling, my life is yours, and your life is mine, and the wall, instead of dividing us, closes

us in and round, and is the wall of our home, into which no other man shall come. That is the real meaning of marriage. It is a home, not a tomb."

"Heaven or hell," she repeated. "How does it go? There is no third place in it."

"Nùlma," he whispered, "I am going to tell you something that will show you how much I love you. Dear, I had a feeling that he would come to you this evening. Last night I was here; I saw him in his boat; I watched him land. I knew that he had seen you, and would not be content with that only. I had a great fear, Nùlma. I knew that my wife was pure as snow and true as steel; but I was afraid. And I resolved, dearest, that if your love conquered, and he made you promise to give your life into his keeping—then, my wife, I resolved that you should be free to do so without regret or dishonour."

The girl started, and looked up at him with frightened eyes.

"Uncle Van, do you mean that you would have gone away and left me?"

"Yes; I would have gone away—a long way, my dear. I am not one of those who set great store on life, and mine seems to me now only valuable in so far as it contributes to your happiness. If by giving it up I could secure that for you, I would do so gladly."

"Oh, Uncle Van!" she cried shrilly. "You

didn't mean *that*—you couldn't mean that you would have died for me?"

"Yes, dear, I meant it; but don't let it distress you. That's all over now. I only tell you that you may understand my love, and know that you need never hesitate to give me your full confidence, or to ask me to do anything in the world for you, even to the giving up of my life. I thought it out as I stood waiting and watching—to guard you, my Nùlma. It would have been quite simple. Neither you nor anyone else would have guessed the truth. A fall over the landslip by the river-path, which we were saying only the other day would be so dangerous on a cloudy night—just the sort of place where an accident might so easily happen—"

"Caspar—oh, Caspar, my husband!" Nùlma's arms were round Van Vechten's neck, her slight form pressed against his as she sobbed. "Oh, don't kill me by saying things like that! I can't bear it. I *couldn't* lose you now. There's no one in the world cares for me as you do. I love you, Caspar!"

Then Van Vechten knew that the struggle was over, and that he had won. He clasped Nùlma close, and their lips met in the first impassioned kiss that had ever been exchanged between them. For a long time she lay thus in his arms, and then he said to her:

"Now I am going to take my wife home."

• • • • •

From that night of memories, when Caspar Van Vechten won his wife, a curtain seemed to fall between Nülmia and her past. Kenward made a pretext for leaving Leichardt's Town on the following day, and she never again saw his face in Leichardt's Land. Before the Government House party came back from their summer quarters on Ubi Downs, Nülmia and her husband had sailed for Europe, so that, between her and Margot Keefe also, the curtain dropped.

The Van Vechtens were away for several years. Governor Burnside died during their absence, in the fourth year of his term of Office. An impoverished peer was appointed in his stead, and there reigned an elderly Viscountess, deeply impressed with the mission she felt had been delivered unto her, of regenerating society in Leichardt's Land. Thus, when Nülmia again visited Government House, where the opening-scenes of her girl-drama had been played, the place appeared no longer the same, and Lady Arthur Keefe seemed as much a ghost as Lady Randal had been to her successors. With this difference, perhaps, that years added honour to Lady Randal's memory, and obloquy to that of poor, frail Margot Keefe.

Happily for the annals of Leichardt's Land, the culminating act of Lady Arthur Keefe's drama was played upon another stage. Habit is strong, and a clever woman, determined not to lose the man she loves, and who has once loved her, will, under con-

ditions of almost forced propinquity, find no great difficulty in welding anew the broken chain. But her later relations with Kenward and the scandal they made came after the Governor's death and the resignation of the Chief Justice, and have no part in this story of Nùlma's girlhood.

THE END.

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